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Goodbye Barbary Lane

Tales of the City
BOOKS 7-9



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Michael Tolliver Lives

Dedication

For my beloved husband,
Christopher Turner

Epigraph

*“You are old, father William,” the young man said,
“And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”*

—LEWIS CARROL

*“People like you and me . . . we’re gonna be fifty-year-old libertines in a
world full of twenty-year-old Calvinists.”*

—BRIAN HAWKINS TO MICHAEL TOLLIVER, 1976

Confederacy of Survivors

Not long ago, down on Castro Street, a stranger in a Giants parka gave me a loaded glance as we passed each other in front of Cliff 's Hardware. He was close to my age, I guess, not that far past fifty—and not bad-looking either, in a beat-up, Bruce Willis-y sort of way—so I waited a moment before turning to see if he would go for a second look. He knew this old do-si-do as well as I did, and hit his mark perfectly.

“Hey,” he called, “you’re supposed to be dead.”

I gave him an off-kilter smile. “Guess I didn’t get the memo.”

His face grew redder as he approached. “Sorry, I just meant . . . it’s been a really long time and . . . sometimes you just *assume* . . . you know . . .”

I did know. Here in our beloved Gayberry you can barely turn around without gazing into the strangely familiar features of someone long believed dead. Having lost track of him in darker days, you had all but composed his obituary and scattered his ashes at sea, when he shows up in the housewares aisle at Cala Foods to tell you he’s been growing roses in Petaluma for the past decade. This happens to me a lot, these odd little supermarket resurrections, so I figured it could just as easily happen to someone else.

But who the hell *was* he?

“You’re looking good,” he said pleasantly.

“Thanks. You too.” His face had trenches like mine—the usual wasting from the meds. A fellow cigar store Indian.

“You *are* Mike Tolliver, right?”

“Michael. Yeah. But I can’t quite—”

“Oh . . . sorry.” He thrust out his hand. “Ed Lyons. We met at Joe Dimitri’s after the second Gay Games.”

That was no help at all, and it must have shown.

"You know," the guy offered gamely. "The big house up on Collingwood?"

Still nothing.

"The circle jerk?"

"Ah."

"We went back to my place afterward."

"On Potrero Hill!"

"You remember!"

What I remembered—*all* I remembered after nineteen years—was his dick. I remembered how its less-than-average length was made irrelevant by its girth. It was one of the thickest I'd ever seen, with a head that flared like a caveman's club. Remembering *him* was a good deal harder. Nineteen years is too long a time to remember a face.

"We had fun," I said, hoping that a friendly leer would make up for my phallocentric memory.

"You had something to do with plants, didn't you?"

"Still do." I showed him my dirty cuticles. "I had a nursery back then, but now I garden full time."

That seemed to excite him, because he tugged on the strap of my overalls and uttered a guttural "woof." If he was angling for a nooner, I wasn't up for it. The green-collar job that had stoked his furnace had left me with some nasty twinges in my rotator cuffs, and I still had podocarps to prune in Glen Park. All I really wanted was an easy evening with Ben and the hot tub and a rare bacon cheeseburger from Burgermeister.

Somehow he seemed to pick up on that. "You married these days?"

"Yeah . . . pretty much."

"*Married* married or just . . . regular?"

"You mean . . . did we go down to City Hall?"

"Yeah."

I told him we did.

"Must've been amazing," he said.

"Well, it was a mob scene, but . . . you know . . . pretty cool." I wasn't especially forthcoming, but I had told the story once too often and had usually failed to convey the oddball magic of that day: all those separate dreams coming true in a gilded, high-domed palace straight out of *Beauty*

and the Beast. You had to have *witnessed* that long line of middle-aged people standing in the rain, some of them with kids in tow, waiting to affirm what they'd already known for years. And the mayor himself, so young and handsome and . . . *neat* . . . that he actually *looked* like the man on top of a wedding cake.

"Well," said Ed Lyons, stranger no more, now that I'd put a name to the penis. "I'm heading down to the bagel shop. How 'bout you?"

I told him I was headed for my truck.

"Woof!" he exclaimed, aroused by the mere mention of my vehicle.

I must've rolled my eyes just a little.

"What?" he asked.

"It's not that butch a truck," I told him.

He laughed and charged off. As I watched his broad shoulders navigate the stream of pedestrians, I wondered if I would find Ed's job—whatever it might be—as sexy as he found mine. *Oh, yeah, buddy, that's right, make me want it, make me buy that two-bedroom condo! That Century 21 blazer is so fucking hot!*

I headed for my truck (a light-blue Tacoma, if you must know), buzzing on a sort of homegrown euphoria that sweeps over me from time to time. After thirty years in the city, it's nice to be reminded that I'm still glad to be here, still glad to belong to this sweet confederacy of survivors, where men meet in front of the hardware store and talk of love and death and circle jerks as if they're discussing the weather.

It helps that I have Ben; I know that. Some years back, when I was still single, the charm of the city was wearing thin for me. All those imperial dot-commers in their SUVs and Hummers barreling down the middle of Noe Street as if leading an assault on a Third World nation. And those freshly minted queens down at Badlands, wreathed in cigarette smoke and attitude, who seemed to believe that political activism meant a subscription to *Out* magazine and regular attendance at *Queer as Folk* night. Not to mention the traffic snarls and the fuck-you-all maître d's and the small-town queers who brought their small-town fears to the Castro and tried to bar the door against The Outsiders. I remember one in particular, petitions in hand, who cornered me on the sidewalk to alert me that the F streetcar—the one bearing straight tourists from Fisherman's Wharf—was scheduling a new

stop at Castro and Market. “They just can’t do this,” he cried. “This is the center of our spirituality!” We were standing in front of a window displaying make-your-own dildos and dick-on-a-rope soap. I told him my spirituality would survive.

The dot-commers have been humbled, of course, but house prices are still rising like gangbusters, with no end in sight. I’m glad I staked a claim here seventeen years ago, when it was still possible for a nurseryman and a nonprofit preservationist to buy a house in the heart of the city. The place hadn’t seemed special at the time, just another starter cottage that needed serious attention. But once my partner, Thack, and I had stripped away its ugly pink asbestos shingles, the historic bones of the house revealed themselves. Our little fixer-upper was actually a grouping of three “earthquake shacks,” refugee housing built in the parks after the 1906 disaster, then hauled away on drays for use as permanent dwellings. They were just crude boxes, featureless and cobbled together at odd angles, but we exposed some of the interior planking and loved telling visitors about our home’s colorful catastrophic origins. What could have been more appropriate? We were knee-deep in catastrophe ourselves—the last Big One of the century—and bracing for the worst.

But then I didn’t die. The new drug cocktails came along, and I got better, and Thack worked up the nerve to tell me he wanted out. When he left for a job in Chicago in the mid-nineties, the house became mine alone. It was a tomb at first, filled with too many ghosts, but I exorcised them with paint and fabric and furniture. Over the next eight years, almost without noticing, I arrived at a quiet revelation: You *could* make a home by yourself. You could fill that home with friends and friendly strangers without someone sleeping next to you. You could tend your garden and cook your meals and find predictable pleasure in your own autonomy.

In other words, I was ready for Ben.

I met him on the Internet. Well, not exactly; I *saw* him on the Internet, and met him on the street in North Beach. But I would never have known who he was, or rather what he was looking for, had my friend Barney not modeled for a website catering to older gay men. Barney is forty-eight, a successful mortgage broker, and something of a muscle daddy. He’s a wee bit vain, too. He could barely contain himself when he stopped me on

Market Street one day to tell me that his big white marble ass was now available to World Wide Wankers for only \$21.95 a month, credit card or online check.

Once upon a time, this would have struck me as sleazy, but the Internet has somehow persuaded half the world to get naked for the enjoyment of the other half. Barney is a fairly sexy guy, but I squirmed a little when I checked out his photos on the site. Maybe I've just known him too long, but there was something incestuous and unsettling about it, like watching your Aunt Gladys flashing titty for the troops.

At any rate, there was a personals section on the website, so once I'd fled the sight of Barney's winking sphincter, I checked out the guys who were looking for Sex, Friendship, or Long Term Relationships. There were lots of geezers there—by which I mean anyone my age or older—regular Joes from Lodi or Tulsa, smiling bravely by their vintage vehicles, or dressed for some formal event. Most of them offered separate close-ups of their erections, artfully shot from below, so that doubtful browsers could find their way past the snow on the roof to the still-raging fire in the furnace.

What surprised me, though, was the number of *young* guys on the site. Guys in their twenties or thirties specifically looking for partners over forty-five. The one who caught my attention, and held it—CLEANCUTLAD4U—was a sandy blond with a brush cut and shining brown eyes. His actual name was not provided, but his profile identified him as thirty-three and Versatile, a resident of the Bay Area. He was lying against a headboard, smiling sleepily, a white sheet pulled down to the first suggestion of pubic hair. For reasons I still can't name, he came across like someone from another century, a stalwart captured on daguerreotype, casually masculine and tender of heart.

So how did this work? Did I have to submit a profile or could I just email him directly? He'd want to see a photo, wouldn't he? Would I have to get naked? The young can keep a little mystery, it seems to me, but the old have to show you their stuff. Which, of course, is easier said than done. Sure, the right dick can distract from a falling ass, and some people actually get off on a nice round stomach, but who has any use for that no-man's-land between them, that troublesome *lower* stomach of sloppy skin?

Maybe I could pose in my dirty work clothes with just my dick hanging out? (I could call myself NICENDIRTY4U.) But who would take the picture? Barney was the logical choice, but I had a sudden gruesome flash of him directing my debut and thought better of it. Who was I kidding, anyway? CleanCutLad probably got hundreds of offers a week. It was wiser to stick to my monthly night at the Steamworks, where the goods were always on the table, and rejection, when it came, was instant and clean.

And that's the way I left it, aside from printing out the guy's Web page and posting it above my potting shed. It stayed there for ages, curling at the edges, a pinup boy for a war that would never be waged. I might not have met him at all if my friend Anna Madrigal hadn't called to invite me for dinner at the Caffe Sport.

The Caffe Sport is on Green Street, way across town in North Beach, a gaudy Sicilian cavern that dishes up huge creamy mounds of seafood and pasta. Anna had been going there for over thirty years and often used its peasantry charms as a way of luring me out of my complacent nest in the Castro. At eighty-five, she was convinced I was growing too set in my ways. I needed some excitement, she said, and she was the gal to provide it.

So there we sat, awash in colors and aromas, when the impossible happened. Anna was adjusting her turban at the time, consulting the mirror behind my back as she fussed with wisps of snowy hair. Yet somehow she *still* caught the look on my face.

"What is it, dear?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Well, you must have an idea."

A cluster of departing diners had moved toward the door, obscuring my view. "I think I saw someone."

"Someone you know?"

"No . . . not exactly."

"Mmm . . . someone you *want* to know." She shooed me with a large gloved hand. "Go on, then. Catch up with him."

"I don't know . . ."

"Yes you do. Get the hell out of here. I'll be here with my wine."

So I sprang to my feet and shimmied through the tightly packed crowd. By the time I reached the door he was nowhere in sight. I looked to the

right, toward the fog-cushioned neon of Columbus, then left, toward Grant Avenue. He was almost at the end of the block and picking up speed. I had no choice but to make myself ridiculous.

“Excuse me,” I yelled, hurrying after him.

No response at all. He didn’t even stop walking.

“Excuse me! In the blue jacket!”

He stopped, then turned. “Yeah?”

“Sorry, but . . . I was in the restaurant and—”

“Oh, shit.” He reached reflexively for his back pocket. “Did I leave my wallet?”

“No,” I replied. “Just *me*.”

I had hoped that this would prove to be an icebreaker, but it landed with a dull thud, missing the ice completely. The guy just blinked at me in confusion.

“I think I saw you on a website,” I explained.

Another blink.

“CLEANCUTLAD4U?”

Finally he smiled. There was a fetching gap between his two front teeth, which only enhanced the fuckable Norman Rockwell image.

“I could’ve sent you my profile,” I told him, “but I figured it was easier just to chase you down the street.”

He laughed and stuck out his hand. “I’m Ben McKenna.”

“Michael Tolliver.”

“I saw you inside with that lady.” He had held my hand a little longer than actually required. “Was that your mother?”

I chuckled. Anna would love to hear *that*. “Not exactly,” I said.

“She looks interesting,”

“She *is*, believe me.” We were rapidly veering off the subject, so I decided to take the bullock by the horns. “I have to get her home, as a matter of fact. Would you mind giving me your phone number? Or I could give you mine.”

He looked almost surprised. “Either way,” he said with a shrug.

We went back into the restaurant for pencil and paper. As Ben scribbled away by the cash register I looked across the room and saw that Anna was watching this transaction with a look of smug accomplishment on her face.

And I knew this would not be the end of it; something this juicy could amuse her for weeks.

“My, my,” she said as soon as I returned. “I hope you carded him.”

“He’s thirty-three. Cut me some slack.”

“You *asked* him his age?”

“I read it online.”

“O Brave New World,” she intoned melodramatically. “Shall we head down to the park, dear? Before we call it a night?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” I said.

So I walked her down to Washington Square, where we sat in the cool foggy dark and shared a quick doobie before bedtime.

2

Hugs, Ben

I'll give you a moment to do the math. Ben is twenty-one years younger than I am—an entire adult younger, if you insist on looking at it that way. But I really haven't made a habit of this. My first lover, Jon, who died back in '82, was a year older than I was, and Thack and I are only months apart in age. It's true that lately I've gone out with guys who might be described as, well, less than middle-aged, but it never lasted very long. Sooner or later they would bore me silly with their tales of “partying” on crystal meth or their belief in the cultural importance of Paris Hilton's dog. And most of them, I'm sorry to say, seemed to think they were doing me a favor.

Before Ben I'd had little experience with daddy hunters. I knew there were young guys who went for older guys, but I'd always assumed that it was largely about money and power. But Ben claims he's lusted after older men since he was twelve in Colorado Springs and began jerking off to magazines. He remembers rushing home from school to search the latest issue of his dad's *Sports Illustrated* for the heart-stopping image of Jim Palmer in his Jockey shorts. And several years later, in the same magazine, he read a story about Dr. Tom Waddell, the retired Olympic decathlete who established the Gay Games. The very *fact* of this aging gay gladiator filled him with the hope that *some* of the men he wanted might actually want him back. And all doubt was finally removed when he moved to San Francisco after college. The daddies Ben met down at Starbucks or the Edge were sometimes slow to read the gleam in his eye, but given half a chance and a little encouragement, they could leap whole decades in a single bound.

God knows *I* did. Ben called me the very next morning, and I invited him over for dinner the following night. I told him I was making pot roast, just in case he didn't consider this a sex date. And just in case he *did*, I

popped a Viagra half an hour before his scheduled arrival. He appeared at the door exactly on time in well-fitted Diesel jeans and a pale-blue T-shirt, bearing a bottle of Chianti that clattered to the floor as soon as I grabbed him. When we finally broke from the kiss, he uttered a sigh that suggested both arousal and relief, as if he, too, had worried that we might have to eat pot roast first.

“You should know,” I said, releasing him. “I’m positive.”

He looked in my eyes and smiled. “About what?”

“Don’t get smart with your elders,” I said, leading the way to the bedroom.

“You know,” Ben said afterward. “I think I’ve seen you before.”

He was lying in the crook of my arm, thoughtfully blotting the wet spot, his fingers arranging my chest hair with serene deliberation, like a Zen master raking sand.

I asked him what he meant.

“I think you do the garden at my neighbors’ house,” he said.

“No kidding? Where?”

“Out on Taraval.”

“Not Mrs. Gagnier?”

“I don’t know her name, really.”

“French-Canadian, right? Prematurely gray. Makes jam out of her lavender.”

“Well, I don’t know about the *jam* part, but . . .”

“I do. She gave me some last Christmas. Tastes like shampoo.”

He chuckled. “Do you always work with your shirt off?”

I scolded him with a playful yank on his ear. “Only when I think someone’s *spying on me in the bushes*.”

“I wasn’t in the bushes, I was on my roof.”

“Why didn’t you yell down or something?”

“I dunno. I couldn’t tell if you were queer from up there.”

I gave him a puzzled frown. “How high is that roof, anyway?”

He laughed, snuggling into my side again. After an interval of uncomplicated silence he said, “So how do you know the lady you were with?”

I explained that she had been my landlady years ago when I lived on Russian Hill. I told him about her backyard marijuana garden and her huge collection of kimonos, and the rambling old house itself, tucked away in the alps of those high wooden stairs.

“How does she manage that now?”

“She doesn’t. She had a stroke a few years ago, so she moved down to the Duboce Triangle. There are people who help out, you know, in the building, so there’s a number of us to . . . share the load.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Not that it *is* one,” I added. “I love being with her.”

“Sure.”

“She affects a lot of people that way, which is good. She’s still got it going, you know? She still gives a shit about things. Most trannies never make it that far.”

He blinked at me for a moment. “You mean . . . ?”

I smiled in the affirmative. “She was the first one I ever knew.”

“She pulls it off pretty well,” he said.

I told him she’d had some practice, that she’d been a woman for over forty years, almost as long as she’d *not* been a woman.

Ben took that in for a moment. “I’d like to meet her sometime.”

Already that sounded so right to me.

After that first pyrotechnic night, we saw each other about twice a week for three or four months. Ben was kind and bright and appreciative of everything about me I’d recoiled from in recent years: the thickening trunk and silky butt, the wildfire of gray hair sweeping across my chest. Some people think we finally become adults when both our parents have died; for me it happened when someone desired the person I’d become. For years I’d been in a state of suspended boyhood, counting every crow’s foot as I searched for the all-loving man who would finally set things right. Ben made me think that I could *be* that man. Not as some father figure, if that’s what you’re thinking—Ben was way too independent for that—but simply as someone who knew how it felt to be cheated of a father’s comfort and tenderness. Someone who could give you all that.

Loving Ben would be like loving myself, long ago.

I tried to stay cool about it. There was very little to indicate that Ben was even in the market for romance. The emails he sent me from work usually closed with “Hugs, Ben”—a surefire sign, I felt, that he saw us as compatible fuck buddies and nothing more. True, Ben had been partnered several times already, and always to older guys, but there was something distressingly self-contained about him. My heart sank when he outlined his plans for remodeling his tiny one-man apartment, or rhapsodized about hiking in the Alaskan wilderness, where he’d perch on mountaintops for hours on end, reveling in his solitude. Even Ben’s job with a South of Market furniture designer was a little troubling, since one day, he said, he hoped it would afford him the chance to live in Milan or Paris.

None of these scenarios left much room for me, I felt.

But all of them turned me on. I loved picturing Ben in that matchbox room on Taraval, making hibiscus tea before bed. Or swimming naked in a mountain stream, his jeans warming on a nearby boulder. I often fell hard for such manly free spirits when I was Ben’s age or younger, though very few of them returned the favor. That my prince should come now, desirous as he was desirable, was almost too much to believe.

So I took each day as it came, dutifully noting even the slightest sign of hope along the way. The day he showed me sketches of a sideboard he was designing. The night he brought us white peaches from the Farmers Market. A Sunday trip to the Headlands, where we lay all day on an army blanket, comrades-in-arms, without having sex at all. Little doubt remained, in fact, when “Hugs, Ben” became “Love, Ben” and the floodgates finally opened, inundating our emails with reckless Victorian endearments:

My Darling Boy
My Handsome Man
My Wonderful One
My Own

We were sitting on a bench at Lands End, watching a sunset exactly the color of the bridge, when he popped the question:

“I don’t think I could ever be totally monogamous, do you?”

I was momentarily at a loss for an answer.

“I mean,” he went on, “it’s not like I’m a sex addict or anything. I don’t want you to think that . . . but sometimes, you know . . . opportunities arise.”

I laughed nervously. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“And if you really love the guy you’re with . . . and you see yourselves as soul mates and all . . . then you should *want* each other to have those experiences, shouldn’t you? I mean, shouldn’t your love make that possible?”

“Mmm.” It was more of a noise, really, than an actual reply.

“Everyone I know who agrees to monogamy just ends up sneaking around, deceiving the person who matters to them most. That hurts a lot more than just . . . adjusting the rules, so that your love for each other can just make things better. Men aren’t designed to be monogamous, in *my* opinion, and the ones who force themselves into that mold either break each other’s hearts eventually or just . . . completely neuter themselves. I don’t mean a new playmate every week, or even every month *necessarily*, but . . . as long as it’s out in the open and doesn’t impinge upon . . . you know . . . your intimacy with each other, or becomes, like . . . *romantic* or something that’s really . . . consciously hurtful, then I don’t see why two people can’t just agree to. . . .” Flustered, he gave up the effort altogether. “Feel free to jump in any time, Michael.”

I stroked his cheek for a moment. “You’re too young to be monogamous,” I told him. “And I’m too old.”

He studied me seriously for a moment. “You mean that?”

I nodded, smiling dimly. “In some ways I wish I didn’t, but I do. I know too much about life to think otherwise. Which is not to say I can’t still get jealous—”

“Good,” he blurted.

“Is it?”

“Well, yeah, because I can get jealous, too. And I could get *really* jealous about you.”

Why did that make me feel so much better? “We’ll work on that together,” I said.

He was grinning broadly now, revealing that adorable gap again. “Could we take about thirty years?”

I counted soberly on my fingers for a moment. “That may be doable, yeah.”

The next day he removed his personals ad from the website.

And that spoke more eloquently than any marriage license from City Hall.

3

Far Beyond Saving

Okay, thirty years might be stretching it, given the virus I've lived with for the past twenty. I'm still in the Valley of the Shadow—as Mama would put it—but at least it's a bigger valley these days, and the scenery has improved considerably. In my best moments I'm filled with a curious peace, an almost passable impersonation of how it used to be. Then my T cells drop suddenly or I sprout a virulent rash on my back or shit my best corduroys while waiting in line at the DMV, and I'm once again reminded how fucking *tenuous* it all is. My life, whatever its duration, is still a lurching, lopsided contraption held together by chewing gum and baling wire.

And here's the kicker: the longer you survive the virus, the closer you get to dying the regular way. My current recipe for continued existence, a fine-tuned *mélange* of Viramune and Combivir, now competes for shelf space in my medicine cabinet with Lipitor, Wellbutrin, and Glucosamine Chondroitin, remedies commonly associated with age and decrepitude. (Well, maybe not Wellbutrin, since even the young get depressed, but that was no big deal in my own youth.) There are plenty of ironies in this, lessons to be learned about fate and the fickleness of death and getting on with life while the getting is good, but you won't read them here. I've had enough lessons from this disease.

Strange as it seems, I can remember a time when I was sure I wouldn't outlive my dog. I acknowledged this to Harry, the dog himself, one drizzly winter night when Thack was away on business. As Harry lay curled in my lap, I told him I'd be leaving soon but not to worry, that I'd be in a better place. I don't know what got into me; I don't even *believe* in a better place. But there I sat, morbid with fear, soft-pedaling oblivion the way parents do

with their kids. And five years later my little white lie blossomed into black comedy when I laid Harry to rest under a stepping-stone in the garden.

I made the same assumption about my mother. Back in the days of night sweats and endless fatigue, it was reasonable to believe that I'd beat Mama to the grave. In fact, Mama herself argued energetically for my exportation to "a nice Orlando memorial park just down the road from Disney World." My father had been buried there several years earlier, so Mama was bound and determined to launch a tradition: a family reunion of sorts, without the dirt bikes and Jell-O salad. I turned her down gently, but my brother Irwin caved in and bought a plot that could comfortably accommodate his entire family, even the daughter who'd moved to St. Pete to work for the Home Shopping Network. Irwin is fifty-seven, a Christian and a realtor, and so thoroughly committed to both disciplines that he belongs to an organization of Christian realtors.

I'm not fucking with you here; they have a website and everything.

It was Irwin who called to tell me that Mama was feeling poorly and that I might want to think about coming home soon.

"I don't wanna scare you, Mikey, but I thought you should know."

"That's okay, Irwin. I appreciate it."

"It could be six weeks or six months, but . . . it's not looking good."

As hard as it was to hear this, I wasn't surprised. My mother's emphysema, the result of decades of liberation by Virginia Slims, had already confined her to a Christian-run convalescent home in Orlovista, Florida, where, for the past six years, between walls of yellowing family photos, she'd been convalescing her way to death.

"Is she hurting?" I asked.

"Not really," said Irwin. "Just kinda . . . wheezy, ya know. And her color isn't good. She's been asking about you a lot lately."

"Well . . . tell her I'll be there soon. I've got some miles saved up."

"Great . . . that's great, Mikey."

I asked him how Mama had liked the birthday present I'd sent several weeks earlier: a silver-framed snapshot of me and Ben, taken just after the wedding, standing beside a waterfall at Big Sur. I hadn't a word from anyone, so I'd been wondering.

He thought for a moment. "Oh, yeah . . . the picture."

“Right.”

He chuckled nervously. “Good one, Mikey. You had me going for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“C’mon. He works for you, right? Or he’s a friend or something.”

“No,” I said evenly, as if talking to a three-year-old. “That’s Ben. That’s my husband. The one I’ve told you about.”

“Oh . . . sorry . . . I just . . . he looked so—”

“No need to be sorry.”

“But wasn’t that annulled or something?”

I had no choice but to torture him. “What do you mean?”

“You know . . . the state court made a ruling, didn’t they?”

“You’re shitting me!”

“No. They revoked it. It was big news, Mikey . . . even in Florida.”

You bet your ass it was. Singing and dancing in the streets no doubt. Might even be a state holiday by now.

“This is awful,” I said glumly.

“I can’t believe you didn’t hear about it.”

“Do you know what this means?” I said. “We’ve been living in sin!”

After a moment, the light dawned and he groaned in exasperation. “You see,” he said, “this is what I mean. Always jerkin’ my chain. Can’t trust a darn thing you say.”

“Or even a damn thing,” I added, laughing.

Now he was laughing, too. “I mean, c’mon, bro. You send us this picture of . . . I dunno . . . Huckleberry Finn or somethin’ . . . and you tell us he’s your *husband* . . .”

“If it helps any,” I said, “he’s older than he looks.”

A silence, and then: “How old is he?”

“How old was Jesus when he rose from the dead?”

“Mikey, if you’re gonna be disrespectful—”

“I’m giving you a reference point, Irwin.”

“Oh.”

“Ben is a grown man, is all I mean. He’s had a life already. There’s no training required.”

“He’s thirty-three, you mean?”

“Very good. Big gold star on your forehead.”

“Well . . .” Irwin cleared his throat in preparation for a brave leap into the abyss. “He does look nice . . . I mean he looks like a nice guy . . . from the picture.”

“He is, Irwin. He’s got a heart and a conscience and there’s a really solid bond between us. There’s stuff to talk about, you know. The age thing isn’t an issue.” I was trying to be straight with him now, since I wanted him to understand the gravity of what had happened to me. “I’ll be bringing him with me,” I said, “if he wants to come.”

It took him a while to respond. “Well . . . that’s good. I mean . . . it’s good to have support, isn’t it? . . . at a time like this.”

Not bad, Irwin.

“I’d ask you to stay with us,” he said, “but Lenore’s got her puppets spread all over the guest bedroom. You never seen such a mess.”

“Look, we really don’t—”

“And . . . I almost forgot . . . we’re having the floors redone, so the whole place will be . . . you know, pretty much of a disaster area.”

“Well, thanks for the offer, but . . . I think we’ll look for a motel. I kinda *like* the idea of a motel, actually. A neutral place, you know. And some privacy.”

“You sure now?” Irwin’s relief was all but spewing from the receiver. “I could find y’all a condo at least. I think we’ve got an empty demo over by the Gospel Palms.”

The Gospel Palms was Mama’s rest home.

“That’s okay,” I told him. “We’ll just find some place near.” (Even in Orlando, I figured there had to be a decent gay bed-and-breakfast.)

“All right, then.”

“I’ll call you when we’ve set a date.”

“Mama’s gonna be mighty happy, Mikey.”

“Well, give her a hug for me, when you see her.”

And the picture, big brother. Give her the fucking picture.

Let’s put this in perspective: My family has known I’m gay for going on thirty years. I wrote a letter to my mother in 1977 when she joined Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign, hoping against hope to save her own two sons from recruitment by homosexuals. The news that I was beyond saving—and happy as hell about it—was met first by silence, then by a lone

pound cake that I chose to regard as an awkward step toward enlightenment.

But, hey, it was just a pound cake. My folks still loved me all right, but they saw that love as cause for forgiveness, not acceptance. And while Mama and Papa eventually met Thack—and made a damn good show of liking him—they saw no reason whatsoever to modify their stance. My life had been conveniently reduced to a “lifestyle” by then, something easily separable from me, that they could abhor to their heart’s content without fear of being perceived as unchristian. By the time the Berlin Wall fell and queers replaced commies on the big TV screens at my brother’s church, I knew not to expect a miracle anymore; my family was as far beyond saving as I was.

“And your brother’s an actual deacon in the church?”

This was Ben, calling from the bathroom across the hall, where I could hear him rummaging in a drawer. It was just after eight that evening and I was already on the bed, flat on my stomach with my new Lucky jeans shoved down around my ankles.

I twisted my head in his direction. “More like a Sunday school teacher, I think. I don’t understand the hierarchy. They’ve all got *something* to do.”

“No shit?”

“Last year Lenore—that’s Irwin’s wife—was in charge of the fetus key rings.”

“C’mon!”

“No . . . they were selling these little plastic fetuses that were supposed to be the *exact* size of an early fetus. You know . . . so you can carry it around with you and . . . get to know it better. Sort of . . . ‘Fetuses are people, too.’”

Ben came into the room and sat down on the bed next to me, tearing open a foil packet. “You’re creeping me out,” he murmured.

“You should see the *really big one* they put up on Halloween.”

“What do you mean?” Ben removed the alcohol swab from the packet. “Put up where?” He drew a line with his finger from the top of my ass crack to the mound due east of it and began swabbing the target area briskly.

“In a haunted house,” I explained. “You know . . . like they have for kids. Only it’s not spaghetti guts and eyeballs in a bowl, it’s the Big Giant Aborted Fetus.”

Ben groaned.

“And right next to the Big Giant Aborted Fetus is the Gay Man With AIDS.”

“Don’t tell me they actually *took* you to this thing?” There was barely a tingle as the syringe hit its target. And *target* is the word, too, since Ben is a kind soul and thinks he’s less likely to hurt me if he just gives the syringe a jaunty toss, like a dart.

“Well, I didn’t actually *see* it,” I said, “but I met this queen at a local bar who did. He said they used iridescent-purple lipstick for the lesions.”

Ben swabbed my butt again. “Stay there a second, sweetheart. You’re bleeding a little.”

“Never mind that. Are my balls shrinking?”

Ben laughed and reached between my legs. “All present and accounted for, Captain.”

“I know *that*. But are they shrinking?”

“Well, not in my expert opinion.”

My doctor had warned me about the shrinking thing when I started testosterone therapy two years ago. The stuff can give you energy, restore your libido, lift your spirits, and make you grow hair like a Chia Pet, but it can also shrink your balls. Apparently, if your testicles wise up to the fact that someone else is on the job, they can lose interest in the job altogether. The meat may be sizzling, but the potatoes have taken a hike.

“How do they seem to you?” asked Ben. “You handle ’em more than I do.”

I chuckled. “We’ll have to work on that.”

Ben patted my ass. “You’re good to go, honey.”

As I pulled my jeans up Ben dropped the syringe into an empty Ragu jar we had saved for that purpose. “You know,” he said, screwing the lid on, “we should start a Liberal Haunted House. We could have oilmen bombing kids . . . and fags being tied to fences . . . and black men being dragged behind trucks . . . and maybe those Abu Ghraib guys, you know, with the hoods and the wires and all.”

I said that was a nice twist but too unsubtle for liberals.

“That’s the problem,” he said. “We’re *always* too subtle.” He gave me a long, tender look. “I’m sorry, babe . . . about your mom. ”

“Thanks,” I said, looking back.

“I’m glad I’ll get a chance to meet her.”
Poor guy. Little did he know.

Our Little Grrrl

Several times a month I pick up fruit trees at a nursery on Clement Street called Plant Parenthood. That always makes me nostalgic, since I ran the place for twelve years before selling it to my business partner, Brian Hawkins. My T cells had begun to climb by then, and I was sick of pushing Tuscan flowerpots to bored housewives. I wanted to plant something serious for once, to leave my mark on the earth before somebody planted me. I've never regretted that decision. I'm now tending at least a dozen mature gardens that I myself created years ago: lush green kingdoms seeded from my own imagination.

Not that it's getting easier. My arthritis seems to be here for good, and the sheer grunt work of the job can put me out of commission for days on end. I'm my own boss, of course, so I can adjust my schedule accordingly, and I do have an assistant now—the aptly named Jake Greenleaf—who helps me with the trimming and hauling. But the big question remains: *How long can I keep this up?* The topic is almost unavoidable at Plant Parenthood, since Brian turned sixty-one this year, and retirement is his chief preoccupation.

On a recent visit I found my old friend hunched over his laptop with a crazed gleam in his eye, like a zealot planning a people's revolution. Brian Hawkins, hippie-turned-radical-lawyer-turned-waiter-turned-nurseryman, was poring over a website for motor homes. "What do you think of this one, Michael? It's still a class C, but it's got most of the amenities of a class A, without the bulk. It's a little more eco-friendly."

"I hate the name," I said.

"What's the name got to do with it?"

“You’re not seriously gonna hit the road in something called a Minnie Winnie?”

“Hey,” he said, “I’m secure in my wussyhood.”

I laughed. “Have you thought about where you’ll have to *park* the damn thing? Your neighbors will all have bumper stickers that say ‘Baby Jesus On Board.’”

Brian spun around in his chair. “That’s a gross generalization.”

“Is it?”

“Damn straight. All kinds of people have RVs.”

“Like who?”

“Well . . . this sculptress I met at Burning Man, for one.”

“Ah . . . this sculptress.”

Brian grinned. “Don’t start with me, man—”

“You got some New Age pussy in a Winnebago, and now it’s the only way to travel.”

“You missed something, that’s all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Burning Man, buttwipe! The desert! There were sandstorms whipping up all around us, and the stars were so bright you could see by them. The Winnebago made me feel . . . I dunno . . . so *self-contained* out there in the middle of nowhere. I haven’t felt that way since . . . Wounded Knee, maybe.”

I smirked as benignly as possible.

“I’m ancient, aren’t I?”

“Pretty much,” I said.

“Next thing you know I’ll be wearing Sansabelt slacks.” He wrinkled his brow in thought for a moment. “Do old farts even *wear* those anymore?”

“I think they wear jeans,” I said.

“I think they do, too.”

We exchanged rueful looks, sharing our pain. We’ve done this for almost thirty years now, since the day we met, in fact, in the courtyard at Anna Madrigal’s apartment house on Russian Hill. We were both in swim trunks at the time, both bronzing our bodies for a night at the bars, though the bars were as different as the objects of our lust. We were just a couple of

guys talking about guy things, cheerfully enslaved to our dicks yet secretly, deeply, romantic. And those ever-warring instincts drew us ever closer.

Like me, Brian is at least twenty (or so) pounds heavier these days, but that architectural cleft in his chin is just as fetching as it ever was, especially under a sandpaper beard, though the sand is now white as Daytona Beach. It's been ages since I've felt anything like lust for Brian—that would be way too incestuous—but Benjamin, my beloved, finds him eminently fuckable. And Brian *loves* knowing that.

I walked to the window and looked out at the latest shipment of fruit trees. "I need something tall for a courtyard on Townsend. That lemon tree is pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Brian deadpanned, "and the lemon flower is sweet."

"*But*," I said, playing along in a dry professorial tone, "I've always found that the actual *fruit* of the poor lemon is . . . very nearly . . . *impossible* to eat."

"I couldn't agree with you more."

We laughed with idiotic abandon, terribly amused by ourselves, until a voice in the doorway told us we were no longer alone. "You guys are way weird."

It was Shawna, Brian's daughter—an assault of dark-red lipstick beneath crow-black bangs and Harlequin glasses—addressing us tartly with hand on hip. She had stopped by to bring her father a brown-bag lunch from Cowgirl Creamery at the Ferry Building. "If this is early Alzheimer's or something, I need a little warning."

Brian laughed. "We were riffing on a song."

Shawna made the open-mouthed "Huh?" expression that's so popular with the young people today.

"You know," I said, and began to sing for her: " 'Lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet . . .'"

Brian joined in, giving it a saucy Caribbean beat: " ' . . . but the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible—'"

"All right . . . fine," said Shawna. "I'll take your word for it."

I turned to Brian, slack-jawed. "She's never heard of it."

"God," he said, "I'm a fucking Neanderthal."

"It's from Peter, Paul, and Mary," I told Shawna. "Tell your father you've heard of them before he self-immolates."

“Oh . . . well, I have,” she said.

“Thank God,” I said.

“Those old guys on PBS, right? With the fat blond chick?”

Brian groaned.

“Oh, you poor, poor Boomers,” said Shawna, rolling her eyes. “Life is always so hard for you.”

“I’m not a Boomer,” I said. “I was born well into the fifties. And Brian’s too *old* to be one.”

“Bite me,” said Brian.

“Listen, guys,” said Shawna. “I’d love to stick around and get truly pathetic with you, but I’ve gotta get back to work.”

Brian faced off his daughter like a soulful spaniel. “Dare I ask?”

“It’s the same thing, Dad—the Lusty Lady—I’ve only been there two days.”

“Oh, yeah.” Brian remained lackluster. “Seemed like more somehow.”

I laughed, ushering her out of the room. “C’mon. I’ll walk you to the car.”

“Ah,” said Brian. “Now you’re gonna talk about me.”

We did talk about him. Or, more accurately, his discomfort over his daughter’s budding literary career. Shawna, who’s twenty-two and a Stanford graduate, writes a widely read blog called “Grrrl on the Loose” in which she chronicles her escapades in the pansexual wonderland of San Francisco. She’d just signed on for a week of work at the Lusty Lady, a peep show in North Beach that recently became the nation’s first worker-owned strip club. This is journalism for Shawna—a big thrill, sure, but mostly fodder for her site. She has no inhibitions about sex. She’s breezy and unapologetic about her own desires and her willingness to explore them in others. Previous columns have dealt with latex fetishists, foot worshipers, and people who like to fuck in clown costumes. Shawna isn’t always a participant, much to Brian’s relief, but her curiosity remains vigorous and laced with scrappy irreverence. Our little grrrl is nothing if not modern.

I say *our* because I’ve felt like her uncle since 1988, when her mother, a local television anchor, left Brian and Shawna for a career in New York. Brian was a fretful single father but ended up, ironically, establishing his first successful relationship with a female. He lived with Shawna far longer

than he has with anyone else, and even though she now rents a studio in the Mission, the two of them are still something of a couple.

There are other ironies, too. First among them being that Brian, the longtime horn dog of the West, has bred a daughter so unashamedly free-spirited that she makes him feel like—and sometimes behave like—my fundamentalist brother in Florida. And it's somehow poetic that Shawna's vocation incorporates both her mother's love of media exposure and her father's love of . . . well, pussy. Not that Shawna's a dyke. She likes dick as well. And lots of other stuff, believe me. They're all just gadgets in her toy box.

As far as I can tell, Brian rarely, if ever, visits his daughter's website. He wants her to succeed and be happy, but he'd rather not know the particulars. Clearly this less-than-blissful ignorance will become more and more difficult to maintain, since Shawna has already signed a book deal, and the talk-show circuit can't be far behind.

"I need to talk to you about something?" she said outside the nursery.

"Talk away," I told her.

She glanced at her watch. "Shit. I'm gonna be late. Raven's gonna be pissed. Look, Mouse . . . why don't you come meet me later?"

That nickname always feels like a shout from the past. Shawna learned it as a child from her mother—the one who split for New York—and no one else calls me that now.

"Where?" I asked.

"What's wrong with the club?" she said.

"The Lusty Lady?"

"Sure. We can talk in my booth."

I'm sure I must have winced. "I dunno," I said. "I'd be there under false pretenses."

She chuckled. "Everyone's there under false pretenses. We aren't even allowed to use our real names."

I made a note to remember that. It would come as a comfort to Brian.

I found the Lusty Lady on Kearny Street between Columbus and Broadway. I've passed the place for years, big queer that I am, without wasting a moment's thought on what actually happens inside. A brightly backlit plastic sign now spelled it out for me in quaint Victorian block letters—

PRIVATE BOOTHS—OPEN 24 HOURS—as if to invoke the halcyon days of the Barbary Coast. Women, after all, have been shaking their moneymakers at the foot of Telegraph Hill since the streets were sloppy with mud and the girls were paid in gold nuggets. The only new twist is unionization. The Lusty Ladies were recently seen picketing the club in pink T-shirts reading BAD GIRLS LIKE GOOD CONTRACTS while they chanted “Two, four, six, eight, pay us more to stimulate!”

Shawna, I knew, was intrigued by this collision of the city’s two magnificent obsessions, sex and social justice. She liked the idea of women who embrace their libidos yet refuse to accept exploitation. The dancers had unionized when management installed two-way mirrors through which the girls could be videotaped for porn movies without their knowledge or consent—and certainly without compensation. They wanted the mirrors removed and new carpet installed and a guaranteed pay rate of twenty-seven dollars an hour. The money was crucial, the strikers insisted, since unlike lap dancers and other strippers, the girls who work the main stage are physically unable to receive tips; the Lusty Ladies (some of whom are domestic lesbians in real life) are shrewdly separated from their feverish customers (like Jodie Foster from Hannibal Lecter) by walls of protective Plexiglas.

Shawna had already told me her *nom de porn*, so once inside the club I asked the door person where I might find Mary Margaret. I’d dismissed the preposterously dowdy name as Shawna’s way of being subversive in a strip club until I was directed to a Private Pleasures booth and Shawna appeared, moments later, grinning at her anxious gay uncle behind a sheet of streaky Plexiglas. She was done up like one of the schoolgirls over at Saints Peter and Paul, in a pleated skirt, knee socks, and pigtails. And neatly arrayed behind her, like treasured dolls awaiting playtime, was an unnerving selection of dildos.

I tried to mask my discomfort with a joke: “I didn’t know you were Catholic, Mary Margaret.”

She cocked an eyebrow wickedly. “I’m anything you want, mister.”

“Okay, don’t do that. You’re creeping me out.”

She laughed. “Sorry, Mouse.”

“Can we go out for coffee or something?”

She shook her head. "This is my shift. I don't want them to think I'm frivolous."

"Oh, right . . . can't have that."

She smiled indulgently. "It's cool just to talk here. A lotta customers do, believe it or not."

I asked her what the other ones do.

"Masturbate," she said brightly, "or watch me play with myself. Or both. It's not a terrible gig, when you get right down to it."

"Right." This was all I could manage. I had just noticed the handrails flanking the window, apparently enabling the ladies to grind against the Plexiglas. There was also a slot through which cash could be crammed when things really got going.

"It's been a revelation, Mouse. You guys are such funny whimpering creatures."

"Can we make that straight guys, please?"

"No, we cannot. You're *all* all about visuals. Every single one of you. Give you something juicy to look at, and you're set for the evening." The sweet, inquisitive kid I'd taught to roller-skate and taken to nearly every Cirque du Soleil bounced onto a large crushed-velvet cushion and crossed her legs with childish zest, as if I were about to tell her a bedtime story. "It's not sticky over there, is it?"

"I don't wanna look," I told her.

I had already entertained a graphic fantasy about attacking that Plexiglas with a family-sized spray bottle of Simple Green.

"I've only got three more days," Shawna said, trying sweetly to reassure me. "Then I'm moving on to Heirloom Tomatoes."

"Thank God," I said. "Simple wholesome produce."

"Actually, it's a group of old broads in West Marin. They're into lingerie. Heirloom Tomatoes . . . get it?"

I told her that was cute, and meant it, comparatively speaking. It was a whole lot cuter than this unionized mastabatorium, that's for sure.

"Once I'm outta here," Shawna went on, "Pacifica takes over this booth. She's seven months pregnant, and that's the bomb with some of the customers. I'm thinking about doing a piece on it."

"You're kidding me?"

"Well, why not?"

“You mean she—?”

“Don’t make that face. Lotsa people find pregnant women hot. Lotsa guys, in fact. That’s good news in any woman’s book.”

There’s justice, I know, in the fact of an aging gay libertine being made to squirm about sex. Shawna is my karma, I suppose, my just deserts for banking too blindly on the power of my own liberation. There’s plenty I don’t know about, or care to know about, in my comfortable, vagina-free existence, and Pacifica the Pregnant Lady and her devotees are just the tip of the iceberg. I’m not proud of this; it’s just so.

My friend George felt stifled by his own limitations and made up his mind upon turning forty to eat pussy at the next available opportunity. It was not a success, he said, and the woman who had volunteered for this noble experiment had freshened up with a cinnamon douche, so George was left only with a lasting distaste for breakfast rolls. He worked as a ticket agent for Southwest, so the smell of warm Cinnabons wafting through an airport could undo him completely. Some things are better left alone, he said.

Shawna, as it turned out, had decided to move to Manhattan when her book was published and wanted my take on how Brian would react to the news. She’s always been this way, anticipating her father’s feelings like a devoted but anxious wife, desperately afraid of hurting him—of betraying him, really, as strong as that word may seem. The considerate children of single parents often seem to carry that additional burden.

“I think he’s got plans of his own,” I told her.

“You mean the RV?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not serious about that.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

“He’s Mr. Inertia,” she said. “And he’s happy that way as long as nothing else changes.”

I remembered Shawna’s mother saying something similar when she left Brian and her little girl to launch her career in New York. She had found Brian’s mellow passivity intolerable, a serious obstacle to her own ambition. Shawna loves her father as is—down to the last tie-dyed T-shirt

and Neil Young album—but she’s leaving town just the same; she must worry a little about reconstituting that earlier trauma.

“He’ll be all right,” I told her. “He always is.”

“I guess so,” she said, fiddling with a tassel on the pillow. “Will you and Ben come visit me once I’m settled?” She seemed almost waifish at that moment.

“Of course, sweetie. Ben’s crazy about New York.”

“I know *you* aren’t,” she said, “but I’ll make things fun for you.”

“You always have.”

I felt tearful all of a sudden, sitting there in that fuckless brothel while the apple of my eye laid out her dreams for my approval. She looked a little wistful herself.

“Don’t let him grow a ponytail,” she said. “He always does that when he gets depressed.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry.”

“I hate ponytails on old dudes.”

“I hear you.”

“A guy was in here yesterday who had the greasiest ponytail and every time he—”

“Can we talk about something else?” I said.

“All right, Auntie,” she said with an impertinent grin.

The Family Circle

It occurred to me recently that this is probably the last house I'll ever own. (It was the first as well, come to think of it.) The endless possibilities of my youth have been whittled down to this little plot on a hillside, this view of the valley, this perfect lamp, this favorite chair, this flock of wild parrots breakfasting in the hawthorn tree. I'm still enough of a Southerner to love the notion of my own land, my own teacup Tara.

It's not unimaginable that Ben and I could one day pick up and move to a condo in Palm Springs or Hawaii, but I wouldn't bank on it. This is my home on the deepest level; it comforts me in ways I've forgotten how to measure. And were we to leave for momentarily greener pastures, I know we'd harbor the fear of all San Franciscans who leave—that the real estate market, that cruelest of sentinels, would never let us back in.

So I concentrate on what I have and where I am. I take pleasure, for instance, in the way the house is aging—the shingles in particular, which have moved so gracefully past tan and tarnished silver to a rich dark brown. Some of this is just dirt, of course, left there by the vagrant fog, but the effect is enchanting. The shingles have grown as rough and mossy as bark, so the house seems more organic, like something rooted in the earth that will have to return there, sooner or later. To my overly romanticizing eyes, shingles are most beautiful when they're closest to collapse.

On my better days, I try to see my own weathering this way. I rarely succeed. I'm not ready to discolor and rot, no matter how charming the process might seem to others. I'll have to get over this, I know, since I'd rather not leave the planet in a state of panic and self-loathing. I'd rather there be peace and a sense of completion. And I'd like Ben there, of course,

cuddling me into the void with the usual sweet assurances. I know that's not original as fantasies go—and impossible to ordain—but a boy can dream.

In the meantime, I tinker with our home in a way that Ben finds comical, if not a little pathetic. I arrange objects like talismans in a tomb, carefully balancing according to color, texture, and motif. I could show you, for instance, how the rivets on the bowl on the coffee table are repeated in the frame of the dining room mirror and the base of an Arts and Crafts candlestick. I know where every spot of Chinese red can be found in the living room. I never add anything to the decor without considering the metal-to-wood ratio and the need for the sheen and color of ceramics. "Have nothing in your houses," William Morris decreed, "that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful," and I can show you a wastebasket that fills that bill to a tee. I bought it off eBay for \$385. This house will be perfect by the time I'm committed.

A case in point: one night Ben and I were watching *Six Feet Under* when I sprang from the sofa and began rearranging the art pottery on the shelf above the TV tansu. Ben indulged me sweetly as I swapped the purple Fulper ginger jar for the light-green one and offset them both with the large bronze Heintz vase.

"That's been bothering you, has it?"

"I couldn't put my finger on it," I told him, "but it's better, don't you think?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"Don't look at me like I'm Rain Man," I said.

"Come back," he said. "Keith is about to get naked."

As we settled in again for the show, Ben's head warming my chest, my gaze began to creep away from the television screen and back to that shelf of now perfectly composed pottery. And Ben somehow sensed this without looking up.

"Stop that," he said, slapping my belly. "Watch the damn show."

If I'm a stickler for perfect interiors, Ben is our tech support, our resident troubleshooter. He's practically a dyke in this regard, so I'm lucky to have him, since I've never troubleshot anything beyond a snail-infested garden. Anna, my octogenarian friend, is much the same way and has learned to tap

Ben for his expertise in thorny matters of the new millennium. She's always been good about asking for help.

"They're turning off my email," she told him bleakly one night. The three of us were eating Thai delivery food in her garden apartment off Duboce Park.

"Who's turning it off?" asked Ben.

"The people at Wahoo," she said.

Ben smiled faintly but didn't correct her. "Have you paid your bill?"

"Certainly," she replied, "but they found a virus on an email someone sent me. It was called 'Your Doom.' Can you imagine? Like a Gypsy curse out of nowhere."

"Sounds fishy," Ben said. "They don't cut off your email because of something that's been sent to you. Did you click on any attachments?"

"Well, no. The mention of my doom scared the hell out of me. Was I wrong? Should I have clicked?"

"No, just delete it. It's probably carrying a virus itself. They're trying to scare you so you'll do what they want."

"How wicked," she said. "Like the president."

"Yes," said Ben. "Except no one's dead yet."

Anna smiled at him appraisingly, then turned and looked at me, widening her eyes. "This boy's a treasure, dear."

I told her I knew that already.

"Well, aren't you glad I made you go after him?"

"Oh," I said, teasing her. "You want credit now?"

"It certainly wouldn't hurt." She dunked her chicken skewer into the peanut sauce.

"Well, *I'm* grateful," said Ben.

"Thank you, child. You get some more Pad Thai."

"It's delicious," I said, grateful for a chance to change the subject. I've always been uneasy about proclaiming my bliss too confidently, for fear of it deserting me—as fucked-up as that sounds. "Where did it come from?"

"A new little place down the street. Shawna told me about it."

"God," I said. "What *doesn't* that girl know about?"

"She's just *interested*," Anna said. "That goes a long way in this world."

She meant it only as a compliment to Shawna, but somehow I felt reprimanded for my failure to be more adventurous.

“Michael went down to the Lusty Lady,” Ben offered.

Anna blinked at him in confusion.

“You know,” said Ben. “The strip joint Shawna’s writing about.”

“Oh, yes!” Anna crowed. “I can’t wait for that one. She’s always so sharp and funny. And she gets so *involved*, doesn’t she?”

“I’ll say,” I muttered.

Anna dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “You sound like you don’t approve, dear.”

“It’s not a question of approval,” I told her. “I’m just concerned.”

“Oh dear, that was Brian’s line, too. You boys are being silly. She’s an extremely sensible girl. What she’s doing now is just . . . raw material . . . not a way of life.”

“Gimme a break,” I said. “She’s diddling herself in a plywood cubicle.”

“Oh,” said Anna, remaining deadpan. “And you never did that, I suppose?”

Ben chuckled. “She’s on to you, baby.”

“That wasn’t for money,” I shot back. “And I wasn’t dressed as a Catholic schoolgirl.”

Both of them were laughing now, and not entirely *with* me. “Oh, well,” said Anna, winking at Ben. “Thank God he has standards.”

It’s awful when young and old alike can team up to mock you.

After dinner Jake Greenleaf joined us in the garden. Jake, you may recall, is my sometime assistant. He’s a short, stocky bear of thirty or thereabouts with a trim little beard and soulful gray eyes. I brought him into the family four or five years ago, when I was still single, having picked him up at the Lone Star Saloon one night. Though he lives upstairs from Anna in another apartment, he comes and goes freely as a helpmate.

Appearing on the terrace that night, Jake looked like someone from another era—my own, in fact—in loose khakis with wide suspenders and a flannel shirt. The effect of this mining-camp getup is just as deliberate as Jake’s rusticated name. Both were chosen to suggest the strong, earthy, no-nonsense person he intended to become.

“You guys wanna vaporize?” he said, holding up a wooden box from which a plastic hose dangled like an umbilical cord. Vaporizers, for the uninitiated, are designed to heat cannabis just enough to release its

psychoactive ingredients but not enough to create harmful respiratory toxins—i.e., smoke. They're all the rage now among the health conscious and the elderly. The ordinary kind is sold for a hundred bucks or so at shops in the Haight, but this wacky contraption was Jake's own creation. He was proud as he could be of it. He had built it out of barn timber from Sonoma and adorned it with eucalyptus pods.

"Your timing is perfect," said Anna. "Come sit down, dear."

So Jake joined the family circle and plugged the vaporizer into an outlet in the terrace. Soon we were passing the tube around, sucking up the smokeless, pot-flavored air like Alice's caterpillar. Ben, as usual, abstained. By his own account, he did too much speed and ecstasy in his youth (way back in the mid-nineties), so he limits himself to wine and the occasional mojito. He would never be so sanctimonious as to say that he's high on life, but he is, the little bastard; he's his own source of intoxication.

"What is that smell?" he asked, when the rest of us were pleasantly buzzed.

"Can you smell it?" asked Jake. "Your nose must be really sensitive."

"No. That floral smell. It's so intense."

"That's the datura," said Anna. She lifted her wobbly blue-veined hand and pointed to the tree at the end of the garden. "It releases its scent at night."

Ben turned and looked at this preposterous plant with its dozens of pendulous trumpet-shaped blossoms. "It has psychotropic qualities," I explained. "Shamans have used it for centuries to see spirits and induce trances."

"It's also a poison," Jake added. "It can drive you insane."

Anna was already lost in recollection. "We had a lovely one at Barbary Lane. A golden one. In the corner next to the garbage cans. Mona was always threatening to make tea out of it." She turned and looked at me sweetly. "Do you remember it, Michael?"

I wasn't sure I did, but said so, anyway.

"The more I trimmed it back," she said, "the more blossoms it grew. All year long. I thought it would never stop entertaining us."

There was a distinctly bittersweet ring to these words, so Ben, bless his heart, leaped gallantly into the silence that followed. "Michael's told me

about Barbary Lane. It must've been wonderful. Your own little secret world up there."

"It was nice," said Anna, keeping it short and sweet. She seemed on the verge of tears. "You should see for yourself, dear. It's an actual city street. They can't keep you out. Just walk up the stairs and act like you belong there."

Later that night, when we were done with the vaporizing, I told Anna and Jake that Ben and I would be visiting my family in Florida the following week.

"Well . . . that'll be nice," said Anna. "For how long?"

There was a trace of anxiety in this question, so I tried to minimize it. "Just three or four days. No more than that. My mother's not doing very well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Anna. "Would you give her my best?"

Anna met my mother no more than twice, and well over twenty years ago, but she never stopped sending her best to Florida. My mother had little use for it. She rarely ever remembered who Anna was, unless I broke down and referred to her as "my colorful landlady." That always nailed it for Mama, and I'm pretty sure Anna's "color" was what made her suspect in Mama's eyes. I don't think she had a clue about Anna's sex change, but the instinct that "something ain't right" was deeply embedded in her DNA. "When it comes to folks," Mama always said, "you can't be too careful."

"When were you last home?" asked Jake.

"You mean in Florida?" I said. "Two years, I guess."

"Have they met Ben yet?"

"No, but they've torn up his picture."

Ben flashed his sexy jack-o'-lantern smile. "You don't know that."

"Well, they aren't showing it around, that's for sure. Unless they're praying over it at an Ex-gay meeting."

"Don't be naughty," said Anna. "You're frightening Ben." She turned to the object of her concern. "I'm sure they're lovely people, dear. I've met his mother and she's the salt of the earth."

"Salt of the wound is more like it."

"*Michael!*" This was Anna and Ben, scolding me in unison. Jake, I noticed, was leaning back in his chair, legs crossed, arms folded, chuckling

manfully under his breath. He knew what I was talking about. He has a mother like mine in Oklahoma.

The evening didn't last much longer. Anna was getting tired, and Jake had to get up early to help me thin a clump of bamboo at a house in Parnassus Heights. Ben and I kissed Anna goodbye, and Jake, as usual, escorted us down the passageway to the street. It was a tight squeeze between the houses, but it was strung with colored lights year-round—a nod to the full-scale fantasia Anna once orchestrated at 28 Barbary Lane. This little studio in the flats with its lone datura and its two potted azaleas was a touching distillation of everything Anna had left behind. It seemed to make her happy, though; it seemed to be all she needed.

"She looks good," I told Jake, once we were out of earshot. "She's over that flu, I guess?"

"Pretty much," he replied. "Notice her new nail polish?"

"Nice," I said. "Very Sally Bowles. I should've said something to her. Are you responsible for that?"

"Yeah, right," Jake snorted, reminding me that he was strictly the heavy-hauling dude in the building; the seriously girly shit was left to his flatmates.

"Who's Sally Bowles?" asked Ben.

I turned and looked at my younger, less theatrical half. "She used to be married to Ansel Adams."

"You're kidding?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

Jake clapped Ben on the shoulder, brother to brother. "Don't let him fuck with you. I don't know who the hell she is, either."

"What is happening to queers?" I said.

Jake chortled and opened the gate for us. "I'll see you in the morning, boss. You guys take care." He turned to Ben. "You're the one doing the driving, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah," said Ben.

"Good."

They exchanged a knowing look that, more than anything, made me feel loved.

A Guy Without Trying

The night I met Jake at the Lone Star the place was almost empty. He was sitting alone at the bar, this sturdy little Shetland-pony-of-a-guy with a Corona in his fist. Every time he took a swig from the bottle, he'd set it down and regard it intently, as if about to say something terribly important to the lime wedge at the bottom. It was quite a brave show of independence, so I was fairly certain he was looking for company.

I pulled out the stool next him. "You mind?" I would not have asked that in a crowded bar, but it seemed polite under the circumstances.

"Nah, buddy, it's cool."

So I sat down and ordered a beer. Jake's little swig-and-stare ritual seemed to intensify, but he didn't gaze in my direction.

"Kinda slow tonight, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah, I guess. I'm new to here."

"The bar or the town?"

"The bar," he replied. "And the town, too, more or less. I moved here from Tulsa a year ago."

I asked him if San Francisco agreed with him.

"It's okay." He shrugged.

"But?"

"I dunno. The guys are either totally married or ordering each other like pizzas off the Internet. Or both. I'd like more of the stuff in between."

"Like?"

"You know, just hangin' and talkin' and . . . takin' it from there. I'm into buddy sex, I guess. It doesn't have to be romantic or anything, just . . . you know."

"Intimate," I said, providing the dreaded word.

Those gray eyes were fixed on me now, almost lupine in the darkness.
“Yeah.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” I said. “But you can say all that online, you know. That’s the great thing about the Web. You can ask for exactly what you need.”

“I know that,” he said, “but I’d rather not ask the whole world if I can help it.”

I turned and smiled at him. “I know what you mean.”

At the time, I thought I did.

Ten minutes later Jake suggested we head out for something to eat. I was ready to take him home by then, having already imagined the feral heat of that furry little body, but I thought it better to let him set the pace. He seemed like a certainty, and buddy sex was sounding pretty good to me, so why the hell *not* take our time about it?

I went to pee before we left, and while I was standing at the trough, a guy in tribal tats and a grimy canvas Utilikilt was peeing like a fire hose at the other end. I’d noticed him earlier, watching me from across the room, so I wasn’t surprised when he spoke.

“Listen,” he said, gazing straight ahead. “It’s none of my business, but . . .” He shook his dick a few times, then returned it to its Bat Cave under the Utilikilt. “If you’re looking to get fucked tonight, you’re looking in the wrong place.”

“Excuse me?” I stiffened on the spot—and not in a friendly way, either. *The nerve of this asshole*, I thought. I had barely even glanced at him.

“That guy you’re talking to,” he said, “is a transman.”

I must have taken a little too long to answer.

“He used to be a girl,” he explained.

“I know what it means,” I said quietly.

“No offense, dude. Just thought you should know if you didn’t. I met him once at the Sundance Saloon. There’s nothing down there.”

He clapped his hand on my shoulder as he left.

“Just doin’ you a favor,” he said.

Leaving the toilet, I had a creepy sense of *déjà vu*. I remembered another guy, another total stranger, who once “did me a favor” by tipping me off that a potential playmate was HIV positive. I should have told him I

was positive myself and had no use for his health warning. I should have said I found him ridiculously old-fashioned, since anyone in his right mind these days—especially around here—presumes *everyone* to be positive, and takes responsibility for his own fucking health, because there is no free ride anymore, you sorry-ass gossipy old leather nancy. I should have said all of that, but I didn't. I just stood there gaping while he dropped his little stink bomb and sashayed off like a spiteful teenage girl. All he'd wanted, anyway, was to see the look on my face.

Not unlike the queen in the kilt.

Jake hopped off the stool as soon as he saw me returning from the rest room. He was about five-six or thereabouts, somewhere in the Tom Cruise range.

"What'll it be, buddy? Burritos or burgers?"

"Either's fine," I said.

As we left the Lone Star together, the kilt queen turned and watched us in undisguised horror.

I gave him a thumbs-up, just for the hell of it.

I won't pretend I wasn't walloped by the news. Jake's masculinity was the very thing that had drawn me to him in the first place. It wasn't some phony butch overlay; it came from deep inside, and it was totally devoid of irony. He didn't even seem queer to me; he was more like some easygoing straight guy, a guy without trying.

Except.

I stole quick glimpses of him as we sauntered toward the taqueria. Under the streetlight his jaw looked just as strong and square as it had in the dark. I tried like hell to see a woman there, but couldn't. His gait was a little studied, I guess, like a boy rehearsing his swagger on the first day of camp, and I towered over him considerably, but all of that just added to the charm.

I wondered if his chest was bound or if he'd had surgery. I wondered if his nipples were funny-looking. I wondered if he'd had a penis made out of whatever the fuck they make penises out of. I wondered how often he picked up gay men and if he'd always preferred them to women and if he was scared shitless right now, wondering if I'd already guessed, wondering what I'd do when the other shoe dropped.

At the taqueria we talked about gardening and the war in Iraq and the nifty new copper-clad museum rising in the park. He tried to talk about the Forty-niners, poor thing, but gave up the effort when it became clear that sports banter was not in my manly repertoire. When our talk turned to where we lived, I knew where we were heading.

"I'm in the Duboce Triangle," he said, "but I have roommates."

"Ah," I said, realizing exactly what that "but" meant.

"How 'bout you?" he asked.

"I'm up on Noe Hill."

"No partner or anything?"

"Nope." I smiled at him. "Not for a few years now. I'm just out for fun these days."

He nodded solemnly for a moment. "I'm really into giving head," he said.

"Is that so?" I gave him a crooked smile.

"I'm pretty good at it, too. You could just kick back."

There was no easy response to this, nothing glib that could rescue me. I liked Jake well enough, and he was still a hot little bear cub in my mind's eye, but what would happen once we got down to business? Would the illusion still hold? Would I embarrass myself completely, or, worse, hurt his feelings? I bought time by asking a question I'd rarely asked before in my fifty-five years of existence: "Aren't I a little old for you?"

Jake just shrugged. "Age is no biggie, if I like the guy."

"And there's something else," I said, reminding myself of Jack Lemmon in the last scene of *Some Like It Hot*, when he's up against the wall and desperately searching for all the reasons he can't marry Joe E. Brown. "I'm HIV positive."

That just made him shrug again. "Then I won't floss," he said.

When I laughed at that, Jake laughed, too, almost in relief, realizing that he'd won that round out of sheer audacity. It was a moment of brotherly bonding, so the pressure was off for a full five seconds before he turned serious again.

"There's something I have to tell *you*," he said.

I'd been ready for this, so I looked him squarely in the eye. "No, you don't," I said. "You really don't."

He gazed at me solemnly for a moment. "You're cool with it, then?"

“I’m new to it,” I said. “Let’s put it that way.”

“We could talk about it, if you want.”

I shook my head. “I’ll spare you the after-school special. I’m sure that gets old.”

“Oh, man,” said Jake.

“The thing is,” I offered, “I’m sort of an old dog. And you’re sort of a new trick.”

Jake smiled at my inadvertent pun. “Do you mind if I ask how you knew?”

I decided to banish the kilt queen once and for all. “It doesn’t matter,” I told him. “It had nothing to do with how you look, if that’s what you mean.”

“For real?”

I nodded. “You’re a handsome guy from where I sit.”

Jake was blushing furiously now, a tide of scarlet surging beneath his five-o’clock shadow. He plunged a fork into his burrito. “Can we go to your place, then?”

I nodded. “As long as you understand—”

“You won’t have to do anything to *me*, all right?”

“That wasn’t what I—”

“And don’t worry,” he added. “I’ll keep my jeans on. I don’t like that thing any more than you do.”

Jake followed me back to Noe Hill in his car. Once inside the house—and the proper lighting was established—I retrieved my hammered-copper pot tray from the drawer by the sofa. As I rolled a joint, Jake just stood there, bouncing on his heels and socking his fist into his palm like an anxious delinquent. He reminded me of myself, over thirty years earlier, all bluster and bluff, when I first went home with a stranger.

“Sit down,” I said, patting the sofa.

Jake sat next to me, but not especially close.

I lit the joint and held it out. He took it and toked expertly.

“Did you get stoned in Tulsa?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? I worked at Wal-Mart.”

“Does that mean yes or no?”

“It means what the fuck *else* is there to do.”

He passed the joint back to me, and I dragged on it fiercely, hoping it would give me the nerve to face the uncharted territory ahead. I took courage from the memory of a hot night in Chicago when I smoked a doobie on Navy Pier, then came back to the Drake and whacked off to straight porn on Spectravision and got off on it fine, especially with poppers, because sex, I was learning, is a place where all of us go, regardless of gender or sexuality. No matter where we begin, it's just one big steamy locker room in the end.

Which is the scary part, of course.

"You wanna take off your boots?" I asked.

"That's okay, buddy, I'm cool." Jake was sitting forward, elbows on his knees, rocking a little as he gazed at me sideways. "You wanna kick back?" he asked.

I took a last drag on the joint, then stubbed it out in my little Roycroft ashtray. I scooted back into the nubby cotton bolster as Jake knelt between my legs and got to work with quiet efficiency, still wearing his jeans and a loose gray T-shirt. He popped the top button of my 501s, mercifully liberating my belly, but didn't pull my jeans off right away, just fingered me studiously through the denim as if fitting my dick for a custom suit. When I started to get hard, he looked up. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"What does it look like?" I said.

He grinned and popped the other five buttons.

I said the first thing that came to mind: "You remind me a lot of a scoutmaster I used to have."

"Oh, yeah? Did you guys do stuff like this?"

"Oh, hell, no," I said. "He was straight as they come. He took us to the Everglades once, and I saw him in his boxer shorts. I never got over it."

I felt the brush of Jake's beard against my thigh as his tongue swabbed its way along my dick. *This is not his first time*, I thought. When he was finally free to speak, he gazed up at me intently.

"You got any?" he asked.

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"Boxer shorts," he explained.

I smiled. "Yeah."

"Want me to wear 'em?"

"Sure."

He hopped to his feet. "Where?"

"Straight back and to the left," I said. "Second drawer from the top."

He was gone less than a minute. When he returned he stood in the doorway for a moment, legs apart, to give me the full scoutmaster effect.

"Very nice," I said.

It wasn't a faithful reproduction of Mr. Ragsdale, but it was close enough.

The sex was pretty much as advertised. Mostly he went down on me, and that was nice, I have to say. He was a good kisser, too, though he seemed less interested in that. I felt kind of selfish, to tell you the truth, just lying back like a sultan, so I moved my leg up into those boxer shorts, thinking that a little pressure there might be appreciated. My leg was promptly redirected, so I returned to my passive state and took the rest of my cues from Jake. He wanted to see me come, he said, so I jerked off while he worked my nips with the efficiency of a seasoned safecracker. I left my load, as directed, on the front of his Nature Conservancy T-shirt. "All riiiiight," he growled. "Good one, buddy."

We lay there side by side, limbs overlapping, until my breathing had subsided and I felt called upon to break the silence.

"Do people always ask you—?"

"—what my name used to be?"

I laughed. "Guess they do."

"I never tell them," he said.

"Why? Was it Myrtle or something?"

It was a calculated risk, but he did crack a smile. "It's nothing to do with the name."

"You just don't know that person anymore."

"Right," he said. "Close enough."

"I hear you," I said.

"You ever need a hand, by the way?"

I wasn't sure what he meant by this.

"You said you were a gardener, right?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Well, if you need help . . . I'm really into horticulture."

"Great."

“I grew up on a farm. I don’t mind a little work.”

“I’ll remember that,” I told him. My usual practice was to hire one or more of the Mexican guys hustling for day labor down on Cesar Chavez, but it was like buying a pig in a poke, as my mother used to say. Lots of the guys are incredibly hardworking and sweet, but others can be falling-down drunk or homophobic or both. I don’t speak a bit of Spanish, but the word *maricón* has a way of leaping out at you, believe me. I’ve heard it so often on the job, you’d think it was a species of plant. Who the hell needs that?

Jake reached into his jeans and handed me a crumpled card with his cell-phone number. The card was khaki-colored and JAKE GREENLEAF was written in dark-green letters intertwined with ivy. Below, in smaller letters, it said: New Man.

I thought that was cool and told him so.

By mutual choice, Jake and I never played again, but several weeks later I asked him to help me with a job near Buena Vista Park. He was all I’d hoped he’d be: dependable, cheerful, and not too chatty on the job. Best of all, he seemed to enjoy tackling the tougher stuff—digging out roots, say, or hauling flagstones, or working in the rain. Heavy labor was apparently a kind of fulfillment to Jake, a necessary stop on his path to completion—if not completion itself. I could hand him the nastiest job in the world and feel almost noble about it. Ours was a match made in gardening heaven.

One day at lunch, when we were both eating yogurt in a client’s backyard, I noticed how the hair on my arms had grown and realized in a moment of shivery solidarity that Jake and I were probably *both* shooting testosterone. We’d never really talked about his pharmaceutical requirements, but this seemed like a logical opening, so I showed him my lushly foliated forearms and told him what had caused them.

“Yeah,” he said, smiling. “It’ll do that.”

“It’s amazing stuff,” I said. “It really boosted my spirits . . . *and* my energy.”

He nodded. “Same here.”

“I worry sometimes about prostate cancer, but . . .” I didn’t pursue this thought since it wasn’t an issue for him, I presumed, and I was wary of destroying our cozy commonality. “Everything’s got its risks, I guess.”

Another nod. “That’s why I’m against surgery.”

I thought he meant surgery in general, which puzzled me.

"You know," he said. "The operation. The addadictomy."

"Oh," I said. "Is that what it's called?"

He grinned. "That's what *I* call it, anyway."

It took me a few more seconds to get it. "Oh, fuck," I said, laughing. "Addadictomy."

Jake looked pleased with himself. "A little tranny humor," he said.

I'd never heard him use that term to describe himself, so I was emboldened to press further. "Have you always felt like a gay man?"

He thought for a moment, then shrugged. "I've always felt male. And I've always wanted to be with men."

"Isn't that the same thing?" I asked.

Jake lobbed his yogurt can into a trash barrel like a kid shooting hoops. "I don't feel very gay most of the time."

It wasn't hard to grasp the alienation of a guy who wants to chase dick without having one himself. Jake had spent most of his life feeling betrayed by his anatomy, but even now that he'd relocated to Queersville he was still too queer for the queers. *He just needs a nice girl*, I thought, reminding myself of my mother when she learned I was gay. But it was true. Men are hung up on visuals, as Shawna had recently observed, but women give weight to the heart and the mind when measuring attraction. If Jake identified as a butch lesbian—or even as a straight man—some woman would find reason to love him.

"There's someone I want you to meet," I told him.

Three weeks later, when Anna was recuperating from her stroke, that meeting finally occurred. I took Jake by St. Sebastian's Hospital one day after work and introduced him to my former landlady. She was thrilled to have company beyond her regulars, and I could tell that she saw in Jake a potential protégé. Jake, in turn, found a sort of spiritual grandmother, someone who understood him without effort or condescension. He would visit on his own after that, bringing her chocolate and magazines, then just sitting by her bed while she read. "He doesn't have much to say," Anna once told me, "but there's a lovely little light in there."

At that point Anna was just another tenant at 28 Barbary Lane, having sold the building in the early nineties to a Hong Kong investor. When her

stroke made it clear that she could no longer manage that precipitous climb, it was Jake who proposed a solution. There was a vacancy in his building, he told her, a sunny garden apartment surrounded by level terrain. His own place was upstairs, so he could lend her a hand whenever she needed it. Anna accepted this invitation but only if Jake would agree to be paid for his services. She had a decent nest egg from the sale of the building, and she needed assistance from *someone*, so why shouldn't it be Jake? She knew he needed the money, and he already felt like family.

She got a good deal more family than she bargained for. Jake's flatmates, an investment counselor and a teacher at the Harvey Milk School, were also transgendered folk—MTFs like Anna—and they regarded their new downstairs tenant with something akin to reverence. Anna, after all, had affirmed her womanhood well before either one of them was born, so it was almost like having an ancestor around—or so they once told me.

I was invited to a cocktail party in the upstairs flat shortly after Anna took up residence. There were several dozen trannies in the room, hovering around her like acolytes. I couldn't help remembering that Anna had struck me as the rarest of birds all those years ago, yet here she was now, just one among the many. She had never aspired to being ordinary, of course, but it must have been awfully nice to have a little company.

Footnotes to a Feeling

Every six weeks or so Ben takes off for an afternoon of hunting and gathering at one of the local bathhouses. He invariably tells me this a day or so before, since he wants me to know he's not sneaking around, and I do my best to receive the news as casually as he delivers it, since I want him to know that I'm cool with it. Such is the nature of our open relationship (modified plan), and so far it's working. It's a tricky little dance sometimes, but it's preferable to the perils of endless monogamy or constant whoring.

I've seen too many male couples who have either neutered each other with enforced exclusivity or opened the relationship so wide that they turn into quarreling roommates and make their own sex life superfluous. In either case, romance dies on the spot. We don't want that to happen. We've chosen to walk the middle road of full disclosure (minus details) and primary consideration for the feelings of the other. For the moment, that means no frolicking with mutual acquaintances and no sleeping over anywhere and no bringing guys back to the house at any time of the day. Our bodies may be shared from time to time, but our bed is just for us, the temple of our California King-sized love.

The first time Ben went to the tubs in Berkeley I drove down to the one in San Jose to show my solidarity with our plan, but this lame little tit-for-tat proved unsatisfying. I wasn't even horny at the time, and my morbid preoccupation with Ben and some nameless beast across the bay turned my lone encounter into a lackluster foursome. I was done in half an hour and ended up next to the snack machines, boring some poor guy half to death with tales of my happy May-September marriage.

Since then, I'm more likely to be found cavorting with guys via my DVD on the occasional afternoons when Ben's out playing. That's fine with

me. When it comes to sex, I'm happy to receive the occasional windfall, but I just don't have the spirit for the hunt anymore. It's enough to know that Ben will call as soon as he's done, proposing plans for the evening and downplaying his fun. "Boy," he'll say, "they must've been having a special on little dicks," and I'll laugh at that and love him for it, whether it's true or not, because, at the end of the day, I'll have another eight hours of holding him in my arms.

At my suggestion Ben had a bathhouse afternoon just before we left for Orlando. I was paying penance-in-advance, I guess, for inflicting my family on him. (My *biological* family, that is—as opposed to my logical one—as Anna likes to put it.) So Ben took off for the Steamworks at noon, and I stayed at home to wash the truck and curl up in the window seat with a glass of chocolate soymilk and the latest issue of *American Bungalow* magazine. There was an article on Bisbee, Arizona, and its funky little bungalow neighborhoods, and I wondered if that would make a good destination for us; we'd loved our recent road trip through the Southwest and had talked of returning.

I laid down the magazine and glanced at the clock. It was almost one.

He's bound to be there by now, already undressed and wrapped in a towel, already cruising the hallways. He's searching for daddies, of course, preferably with fur, politely deflecting the young and the smooth, the ones who inevitably regard him as their natural birthright. But it won't be long before he finds what he wants . . .

I picked up the magazine again, losing myself in the Southwest. In Monument Valley we hired a Navajo guide named Harley, a chummy twenty-seven-year-old in a Metallica sweatshirt who, for a few dollars more, drove us into sacred territory, a roadless landscape of bloodred monoliths reserved for tribal ceremonies and the occasional Toyota commercial. I don't know if Harley knew we were a couple—he may well have mistaken us for father and son—but he gave a sweet little spiel about the Navajo nation's reverence for androgyny and later played his flute for us and sang while we lay on our backs in a cave, goofy with peace, staring up through a hole at a perfect circle of sky.

By now he's spotted someone—across the steam room, maybe, or loitering in a corner of the labyrinth. He's a bearded history prof at

Berkeley, Jewish possibly, or a black Amway salesman from Oakland with silver at his temples, or some beefy working-class Irish brute. Whoever he is, he's reaching for my husband right now, cupping those clean-shaven balls in his hairy hand as he smiles with avuncular assurance.

The gutters, I realized, were in serious need of cleaning, so I dragged the extension ladder from the truck and propped it against the house. I have just the slightest touch of acrophobia, so the climb left me woozy. I steadied myself at the top, catching my breath for a moment as I gazed across the valley at the television tower on Mount Sutro. It's a gangly *War of the Worlds* monstrosity, but sometimes—like that particular afternoon—the fog erases everything but the top three antennae, creating the ghostly effect of a galleon sailing above the clouds, the Castro's own *Flying Dutchman*.

They've gone to the guy's room, no doubt. Or maybe to Ben's, if he rented one this time. The terrycloth has hit the deck by now, and somebody's blowing somebody. Or maybe they're even fucking already. Right. This. Very. Moment.

I began scooping handfuls of leaves out of the gutter. It's a handsome gutter, as gutters go: copper beginning to show traces of green. I installed it ten years ago, right after Thack moved out, partly to reassert my dominion over the house. The downspouts were badly clogged with leaves last winter, inundating the terrace at one point and threatening to do the same to the house. This year I'd be ready for the rain.

When the gutters were clean, I climbed down from the ladder and returned it to the truck before raking the rotten leaves from the terrace. There was still space left in the green recycling bin, so I crammed in a few dead fronds from the tree fern at the end of the driveway. The rest of the garden looked okay, but I figured there were chores aplenty in the kitchen. Sure enough, the grime under the sink had reached crisis proportions, so I pulled out all the rusting cleanser containers and Simple Greened the hell out of the place.

Are they done yet? Or have they started all over again? Are they lying somewhere together now, catching their breath, explaining themselves to each other?

By four o'clock I was on the sofa watching a Netflix movie. Normally I save them for the two of us, but this one was a thriller, and Ben's never

been crazy about the creepy stuff. Besides, I required serious distraction, and I'd run out of stuff to clean.

In the midst of the movie the phone rang. I hit mute and picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Hi, babe. It's me. I'm on the bridge."

"Hey, sweetie."

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"Just a movie," I said. "Sharon Stone in a big house with snakes dropping from the chandeliers."

"Glad I missed that one."

"How were the tubs?"

"Okay," he said with a comforting lack of enthusiasm.

"Just okay?"

"It was pretty slow for a Sunday."

"Ah. That's too bad."

"There was this guy from San Leandro who was kinda hot, but he had awful dragon breath."

"Ugh," I said, but of course I meant Thank You, Jesus.

"He knows you, in fact," Ben added. "Or of you, anyway. You worked on his ex's backyard in Pacific Heights."

"It's not ringing a bell," I said.

"It was back in the eighties, I think. He remembered your name, that's all. It doesn't matter."

He was right. All that mattered was that Ben had brought up my name to this foul-smelling stud, making it patently clear that he already belonged to someone else.

"Do we need anything?" he asked.

I did a quick mental inventory. "We're out of laundry detergent, if you feel like stopping at the corner."

"Okay. What about for dinner?"

"I thought we'd do some chicken on the grill. I got this great new finishing sauce with apple and chipotle. Fuck!"

"What?"

"We're out of propane."

"No we're not. There's a spare tank in the shed."

"Oh, you're right," I said. "What would I do without you?"

He chuckled. "Watch Sharon Stone movies, I guess."

We lay on the sofa after supper, intertwined and swapping endearments. I won't bother to repeat them here. Whoever named them sweet nothings was right. They really are nothing; they're little more than footnotes to a feeling, almost useless out of context.

"You know what?" said Ben, idly caressing my chest.

"What?"

"I'd sort of given up believing this could happen. I thought I was being unrealistic."

"C'mon," I said. "You're thirty-three."

"So?"

"So that's too early to have given up." I realized this was bullshit the moment it came out of my mouth. I spent most of my twenties feeling unrealistic about love.

"You don't know," said Ben. "It's not that easy to find an older guy who isn't already fucked up."

"Why, thank you, Colonel Butler!"

He laughed. "I mean it."

"I know," I said, kissing the top of his head.

"Your generation has a lot of baggage."

I said that's why I preferred not to date them.

"They think of themselves as liberated, but there are so many wounded old tarts out there. Sex inside a relationship scares the holy shit out of them."

"Well, I'm grateful for them," I said. "They were saving you for me."

He snuggled closer and pecked me on the ear. We were silent for a while.

"I saw Anna at the Bi-Rite," he said at last. "She was there all by herself, just humming away over the produce bins."

I told him that Anna liked to walk to the market sometimes, that she usually referred to it as her "constitutional."

"I hope I'm still that vigorous when I'm her age," Ben said.

"I hope you are, too," I replied. "I'll be a hundred and five, so I won't much feel like getting the groceries."

He laughed. "Did she ever have . . . you know . . . anybody?"

“Anna, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

I thought about that for a moment. “One or two, I guess. A long time ago. She had an affair with a married businessman back in the seventies. His wife was a major drunk and he was dying of something, and . . . Anna gave him a real life for a while. He was dead in a year, but she still keeps his picture around. And there was this guy in Greece in the late eighties. On Lesbos.” I chuckled at the thought of that. “He was an actual Lesbian.”

“What was she doing on Lesbos?”

“Vacationing with her daughter . . . the lowercase lesbian.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Ben. “So what happened to this guy?”

“Nothing. He’s still there, I guess, if he’s even alive. He was this stocky little guy with white hair and twinkly eyes. He wanted her to come live with him. They were really hot for each other . . . soul mates even, but . . . she turned him down.”

“Why?”

I heard myself sighing. “I think it was me, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d been positive for a couple of years, and everybody just assumed I was about to get sick and die. I assumed it myself. That’s the way it was back then.”

“And she didn’t want to leave you, in case . . .”

“ . . . she never saw me again.”

Ben muttered a reverential “Wow.”

“She never said that, of course, but I’m sure it was the reason.”

He petted the side of my head, having already arrived at where I was heading. “You shouldn’t feel guilty about living, honey.”

I told him I felt guilty about not insisting that Anna go back to Greece, that I could have made that my dying wish, that she had been my rock when my lover Jon was dying and it was time for me to return the favor, to place her best interests above my own, especially if I thought I was near death. Anna had waited until she was almost seventy to find a satisfying love, and I had effectively stood in the way of that great happiness.

“She wouldn’t have gone,” said Ben. “Even I can tell that.”

“Maybe not,” I said, “but I should have tried. I could have shown her what she meant to me. I could have been a grown-up about it and not just a

needy child. I think of her walking down to the market all by herself . . .” I started to tear up, surprising myself.

“C’mon. I told you she looked happy. And she’s surrounded by all sorts of people who love and respect her.”

“She doesn’t have this, though.” I meant, of course, a warm body next to hers.

“Well, no, but you didn’t either after Thack left. You thought it was the end of love . . . you told me so yourself. You can’t control these things, Michael. Life hands you shit, and you have to take it. And nobody can fix that for anybody else.”

Then why do I feel so fixed? I thought.

Darn Straight

My brother's living room in Orlando is two stories high, a cathedral of drywall with portholes high up that look out into the tops of palm trees. Ben and I found five such houses on that cul-de-sac, but Irwin had made a point of telling us that the Tolliver residence would be the only one with a speedboat in the driveway: "There's no way you can miss it, bro." There was no way you could miss it from the living room, either, thanks to a strategically positioned sofa. Irwin's latest toy was perfectly framed in the window as he sang its praises from a big leather armchair shaped like a catcher's mitt.

"She's a hottie, ain't she?"

At fifty-seven Irwin was just too old to be using the word *hottie*. Even to describe a boat. *Especially* to describe a boat. But it gave him something safe to talk about beyond that *other* hottie under scrutiny—the man I'd just introduced as my husband.

"That's quite a color," I said. "What do they call that?"

"That's your citron yellow."

I thought about that. "Guess *lemon*'s a word they try to avoid."

Typically, Irwin mistook ironic observation for criticism. "She's no lemon, I can tell you that."

"No . . . I didn't mean . . . That color must look great on the water."

"And lemme tell you, that baby turns on a dime. She's a Cobalt 240 with all the extras . . . reversed chines and everything."

I had no idea what a reversed chine was and had no intention of asking, since Irwin was obviously testing me. All he's ever required to be boring is the frank admission of anyone else's ignorance. "Irwin really knows his boats," I told Ben pointedly.

Ben was a gentleman and led us elsewhere. “Did you guys have boats when you were little?”

“Darn straight we did!” Irwin said, and I realized then exactly how low he had sunk in his recent effort to Christianize his cussing. *Darn straight? Who the fuck says that?*

“It was really Irwin’s boat,” I told Ben. “I was just crew.”

“Hey, remember the night we snuck down to Lake Tibet?”

The name of that lake, I explained to Ben, was spelled like the Himalayan country but around these parts usually pronounced “Tibbit.”

My brother confirmed this oddity. “Our granddaddy called it that, too. I had this dinky little rowboat hidden down there in the reeds. The folks didn’t even know about it. They thought we were at the movies. Remember, Mikey?”

How could I have forgotten? I had waited all goddamn year to see *Mary Poppins*, starring my favorite person in the world, when Irwin, newly licensed and hormonally imbalanced, had hijacked me to the swamps. “I remember,” I told him.

“Boy,” he murmured, “we hunted us some gators that night.”

Ben gave me one of his looks. “*You* hunted gators?”

“Is that so hard to fathom?”

“Well, yeah,” he said, smirking.

“We didn’t really hunt ’em,” my brother admitted. “It was more like . . . harass ’em.” He chuckled, warming to the memory. “We’d shine our flashlights around until we could see their eyes . . . sometimes there were hundreds of ’em shining out there in the dark . . . but we were lookin’ for the eyes that were closest together.”

Ben was obviously confused.

“That meant they were little,” I explained, “and couldn’t hurt us.”

“Ah.”

“Then,” said Irwin, “we’d stun ’em with an oar and toss ’em in a bucket.”

Ben turned to me with furrowed brow. “Why would you do that?”

“To play with them,” I said. “They were . . . you know . . . more docile when they were stunned.”

“Well, I guess so.” My beloved’s jaw was slack with horror. He looked like he was on the verge of reporting me to PETA.

“We didn’t hit them that hard,” I told him, “and we always put them back.”

That did nothing to fix his expression.

“It wasn’t *my* idea,” I said.

They both laughed, but it was the truth. *Nothing* had been my idea back then. Irwin had been the architect of every folly, the guy who taught me how guys become guys and beat the shit out of me in the process. The tide didn’t begin to turn until I was admitted to the university that had rejected Irwin two years earlier. Though he later enrolled in a business college in Tallahassee, he was expelled after a string of drunken misdemeanors, causing a major parental hissy fit at home. When, at twenty-six, I finally told my folks I was gay, Irwin received the news so unhysterically that it took me a while to realize that what he felt, more than anything, was relief. To him, my coming-out meant he was no longer the disgrace of the family; he could go about breeding kids and selling houses, being the man again.

That was decades ago, of course, and Irwin, like George W. Bush, has long since proven that even serious fuckups can make a go of it. But sitting there in that bland suburban hacienda, I tallied the score of our ancient rivalry and realized that I envied nothing about my brother’s life. Not the boat or the four thousand plus square feet or the wife or the grandkid, either—none of the things I once worried I might be missing if I committed fully to a life of homosexuality. That life hasn’t been perfect, but it has been *my* life, tailored to my dreams and safely beyond the reach of God’s terrible swift sword.

My brother can’t say that. Never could.

Irwin’s wife, Lenore, was at Children’s Bible Study, he told us, doing her puppet ministry with one of the grandkids. He expected her back by four o’clock, at which point we could discuss where to go for dinner. There were several malls nearby, offering a plenitude of choices, including an Outback whose steaks, Irwin assured me, were far superior to the Outback steaks on the West Coast. Except, of course, Irwin said *Left Coast*, since that’s been his favorite zinger ever since he learned it on *Rush Limbaugh*.

“So y’all had a good flight?” Irwin was already running out of conversation, but I liked the sound of that second-person plural, since *y’all*,

in its way, implies a couple, and Irwin, of course, knew that I knew that. It sort of sanctified our union. Sort of.

“It was okay,” Ben answered. “Lousy legroom, but . . . you just have to deal.”

“Oh, man, you got that right! I fly business or first these days, but I know what you mean.” He banged his palm rhythmically against the leather of that giant catcher’s mitt as he scrambled for something to say. “So . . . where are y’all staying?”

“Just a little B&B,” I replied. “It’s basic, but it’s all we need.”

It was, to be more specific, a little gay B&B we’d found in the *Spartacus Guide*. We’d been attracted to the name—Inn Among the Flowers—but the flowers had proven to be everywhere but in the garden. The owners, a pair of retired Italian queens from Queens, had lovingly floralized every surface: from the sheets to the upholstery to the toilet paper.

“You shoulda checked with me,” said Irwin. “I coulda got you a discount at the Ramada. Many Mansions meets there every Monday.”

I translated for Ben. “That’s his Christian realtors group.”

“Ah.”

I couldn’t resist the urge to elaborate. “The name comes from the Bible. You know . . . ‘In my father’s house are many mansions.’”

Ben nodded. “Right.”

My brother chuckled. “Some people think it’s because we *sell* mansions. We do sell a few . . . some of us . . . but that’s not what it means.”

Ben smiled back. “It means the different races, right?”

“Well, not so much *races* as . . . it just means rooms, really . . . that there’s plenty of room for everybody in God’s house.”

“And you wouldn’t believe the low low down payment,” I said.

Ben shot me a chastising look.

“It’s okay,” Irwin told Ben. “He’s always been a smart-mouth.”

Lenore arrived home on schedule, a whirling dervish in a pink tracksuit and careful hair. Well into her fifties, she had remained girlish and petite, a feat made all the more dramatic by the presence of her grandson, a delicate doe-eyed seven-year-old named Sumter who had volunteered to help with her burgeoning puppet ministry. As I watched from the porch, they emerged

from Lenore's Chevy Tahoe and began pulling plastic poles from the rear door like a team of well-seasoned roustabouts. It was curiously touching.

I hollered at her. "Need a hand with that?"

She looked up with a start. "Oh, Mikey, you're here! I wondered whose pretty car that was. Come gimme a hug, but don't look, I'm a mess. Shoot, I was gonna change for you. I hate lookin' this way. Sumter, you remember your Great-Uncle Michael."

It was more of a command than a question, so the boy issued a dutiful "Yes, ma'am," but there's no way he could have remembered. I hadn't seen him in at least four years, when his mother (my niece Kimberly, divorced last year from her meth-addicted husband) spent the night with her family at Fisherman's Wharf on their way to a Pleasant Hawaiian Holiday. Sumter shook my hand with somber courtesy and began to tug folds of blue fabric from the back of the SUV.

My sister-in-law embraced me fragrantly. "You look so *good*, Mikey!"

"Thanks, Lenore. You too."

"I mean, you really do. You've got some nice ruddy color in your cheeks."

Yep, some of those meds have lovely side effects.

"Where's Ben?" Lenore asked, looking around.

"Inside," I said, pleased that she'd remembered his name. "With Irwin."

"Oh, no. Gettin' an ear fulla boat, I bet."

I laughed. "I think that's over with now."

Sumter was almost staggering under the weight of that bunched blue curtain. "Just leave that, honey," his grandmother told him. "We'll get it later."

"Is that your puppet theater?" I asked the boy.

"Yes sir," he replied. "It fits on the these here poles." I'd forgotten about that "sir" business. I had to do that myself when I was Sumter's age.

"So it works like a tent," I said. "That's pretty cool." (I don't know why I insist on saying "cool" around the young; it only makes me feel older.)

Sumter crawled into the vehicle and laid his hand reverently on a cardboard box. "This is where we keep the puppets." He pulled out a yarn-haired Muppet-style creature and held it up for my scrutiny. "These sticks here make the arms move, see?"

Lenore gave me a grown-up-to-grown-up look. "He's *real* into this."

“Nothing wrong with that,” I said, smiling, taking the puppet in hand. It was a Bert or possibly Ernie look-alike with the letters GAP imprinted on his sweatshirt. I didn’t get it. “Is the Gap sponsoring you or something?”

“Oh, no.” She chuckled at my ignorance. “That stands for God Answers Prayers.”

“Oh . . . okay . . .”

“All the puppets have little sayings on their clothes. It’s the best way to teach kids the Bible. Keeps ’em interested, you know.”

Sumter had removed another puppet for my inspection, a female in flowing Middle Eastern garb. “This one here’s a Foolish Virgin.”

“So I see,” I said.

Lenore took my arm. “You know that story, don’t you? The Five Foolish Virgins?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I did once but—”

Sumter piped up. “Their oil ran out. They weren’t ready for the Bridegroom.”

Their oil ran out?

“That’s right, Sumter. They weren’t prepared, so they didn’t have enough oil to light their lamps.” She turned back to me. “It’s a parable about readiness. Preparing our souls for the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“Well . . . you can never have enough oil for that.”

I made that joke purely for myself, knowing it would breeze past Lenore. Ben and I had already agreed not to confront the biologicals about the war in Iraq unless they brought it up first. My dying mother was waiting to meet my true love at a Christian old folks’ home in Orlo-fucking-vista; there wasn’t *time* for all-out holy warfare.

Sumter slid out of the SUV and posed by its side. “I wanna be the Foolish Virgin next time.”

“Well, you can’t,” his grandmother said, slamming the tailgate.

“Why not?”

“Because . . . you’re perfect as the Bridegroom. And boys don’t get to be Foolish Virgins. That’s just plain silly, honey. I’ve told you that before. Don’t give Nor-Nor a hard time about this.” She turned, gathering the plastic poles in her arms as she widened her eyes at me. “And not a peep out of you, mister.”

“I wasn’t even—”

“I know it’s a silly name, but one of the kids picked it, and . . . I can’t be Granny yet. I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

I gave her a smile and a salute. “As you wish . . . Nor-Nor.”

Lenore heaved a sigh. “Sounds like a creature from *Star Wars*, doesn’t it? That’s what Irwin said.” She readjusted the poles and began striding toward the house. “Did he offer y’all somethin’ to eat? No, of course not. What am I talkin’ about? You look wonderful, Mikey. You really do. Mama Tolliver’s gonna be so happy to see you.”

She charged ahead of me into the cluster mansion—hell-bent for the first sight of Ben, I guess—leaving me and Sumter to fend for ourselves. The boy looked up at me pleasantly, blinking once or twice, then rubbing his nose with the back of his hand.

“Wanna see the rest of my puppets?” he asked.

Uppity

With Lenore in the house the menfolk relaxed a little. Ben and I welcomed the enlivening effects of a woman—even this one—and Irwin seemed much more at ease with the proof of his normality fluttering nearby. Sumter, meanwhile, had taken an instant shine to my husband, heaping puppets at his feet like offerings to a fair-haired god.

“This one here’s a lion who’s scared all the time,” the kid announced. “And this one’s a witch, even though her dress is way too pretty for a witch, if you ask me.”

“Well, she’s the good witch,” Ben explained. “That green one over there is the wicked one.”

“He’s never seen the movie,” Lenore said, smiling at Ben. “A neighbor brought those over for him.”

“Well, we’ll have to fix *that*,” said Ben. “Do you watch DVDs, Sumter?”

“Sometimes,” said the boy. “I watched *The Princess Diaries* and *Cheaper by the Dozen* and . . . *The Passion of the Christ*.”

“We watched that with him, of course,” Lenore said *sotto voce*. “It’s real inspirational, but it takes . . . you know, a grown-up to explain things.”

I asked her, somewhat wickedly, if she understood Aramaic.

“Oh, no. I meant . . . the suffering part.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “It’s no worse than . . . say . . . *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.”

Lenore missed this impertinence—or chose to ignore it—but Irwin shot me a scowl from the depths of the catcher’s mitt.

Don’t get righteous with me, I thought. You’re the one showing S&M snuff movies to a seven-year-old.

“And this one’s my favorite,” Sumter was telling Ben, ignoring the old folks altogether. “Her name is Ariel. I can make her tail wiggle, see? I’ve got this cool underwater backdrop that I made from Mama’s shower curtain, only that’s back at—”

“Listen, sport,” Irwin interjected, “the grown-ups are fixin’ to talk, so why don’t you take your toys up to Nor-Nor’s room? Your mama’ll be here soon—”

“They’re not toys,” said Sumter. “They’re puppets.”

Irwin, it seemed to me, was already in a state over his grandson’s passionate theatricality and in no mood to split hairs. “Take them upstairs, Sumter. Right this minute, you hear? Or Granddaddy won’t take you to the Dolphins game next week.”

Sumter, so help me, rolled his eyes. “I’m so scared.”

Seeing her husband’s color beginning to rise, Lenore tactfully interceded. “Sumter, honey, what did I tell you about sassing your granddaddy?”

Solemnly, and with dramatic deliberation, the boy filled his arms with puppets and left the room without another word.

“He’s such a funny little fella,” Lenore said.

“He needs a man in his life,” said Irwin. “Somebody to smack some sense into him. He’s got way too smart a mouth on him.”

“Oh, now . . .”

“And I don’t mean one of those wimps that Kimberly’s been datin’ on Match.com. That boy could use a nice long summer camp with a drill sergeant.”

“Oh, Irwin, for heaven sakes.” Lenore sighed at her husband, then gave me a crooked little smile. “He’s kidding.”

“The heck I am,” said my brother.

“I envy him those puppets,” I offered, changing the subject. “They’re so much better than they used to be. I had to make my own out of old socks and papier-mâché. Remember, Irwin? I did *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and I made you be the giant.”

Lenore gaped in delight. “I never knew you liked puppets when you were little!”

I nodded. “I made stages out of cardboard boxes from the Piggly Wiggly.”

“Well, goodness,” said Lenore. “I guess it runs in the family.”

“I guess it does,” I agreed.

What exactly *it* was remained discreetly ambiguous, but the air was electric with subtext. I didn’t dare look at Benjamin. Or Irwin, for that matter.

I knew what they were thinking, though. Both of them.

Sumter’s mother—my niece Kimberly, who works for Florida Citrus Mutual over in Lakeland—came to fetch the child a few minutes later. She stayed to make chitchat and give Ben a brief, voracious once-over, then left the four of us to our various discomforts and a tinfoil tray of deviled eggs Lenore had picked up from the deli at Winn-Dixie.

“I figured y’all would wanna rest tonight,” she said, passing the eggs to Ben. “We can head over to Mama Tolliver’s in the morning.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

“She’s fresher in the morning.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant but thought it better not to ask. “Is there some place we can pick up an azalea or something?”

“Oh, sure. There’s a nice mall right outside of Orlovista.”

There’s a nice mall right outside everywhere, Lenore. It’s nothing BUT malls anymore.

“So . . . Ben . . . Mikey says you’re originally from Colorado.” It was the safest possible approach she could have taken, but at least she was making an effort.

“Right,” Ben replied pleasantly. “Colorado Springs.”

“Colorado’s beautiful, I hear.”

“It is, actually. Magnificent. It taught me to love the outdoors.”

Her brow wrinkled in thought. “Oprah has a house there, doesn’t she?”

“I think she does.” Ben nodded. “Up near Telluride.”

“They were redoin’ it one time on her show. You know that decorator of hers? Nate?”

“Well, not personally.” Ben grinned crookedly, offering a glimpse of that seductive gap. “I think I’ve seen him, though. Sort of . . . compact and handsome, right?”

“That’s him,” said Lenore. “I like him so much. He’s just the nicest person.”

“He seems to be,” said Ben, casting a sideways glance at me.

“He really is,” said Lenore. “And he has wonderful taste.”

I found this endorsement touching. Lenore wanted my young swain to know that she’d had some exposure to queers. If only the ones she’d seen on television.

After a moment she added: “His friend died in the tsunami, you know.”

Ben’s smile wilted. “No . . . I hadn’t heard that.”

It was news to me, too. “His partner, you mean?”

Lenore neither confirmed nor denied. “They were in Thailand in this little hut on the beach, and they woke up one morning, and the roof came clean off the hut, and this big wall of water just carried them away. Nate grabbed on to a telephone pole, but his friend didn’t make it. It was the most awful thing. He talked about it on the show.”

I was mildly unnerved. I’d seen Nate once or twice myself and could picture him tangled in 600-thread-count sheets with his boyfriend—a taller guy, I imagined, and darker, and just as gorgeous—when the unimaginable ripped them from their idyll. But, even thrusting Ben and me into the same situation, I couldn’t get a handle on the horror and the loss. “At least he was out,” I said. “He could be totally open about his grief.”

“Out of where?” asked Lenore.

“You know . . . the closet.”

Lenore frowned. “Well, I don’t think he’s one of those activists, if that’s what you mean.”

Irwin was squirming in his chair. “Would somebody please pass the eggs?”

Ben got up and handed the tray to my brother. “They’re delicious, aren’t they?”

“You know,” I told Lenore as evenly as possible. “I think of myself as an activist.”

“Oh . . . now,” she said dismissively. “You know what I mean.”

I did know what she meant. She meant there were good homosexuals and bad homosexuals, and she would never think of me as a bad one. My parents, I remembered, had once categorized black folks in much the same way. They didn’t disapprove of *all* Negroes. Just the uppity ones. The ones who insisted on *special rights*.

Why do I even bother with this? I thought. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a meaningful exchange with these people—one that didn't focus on scenery or television as a handy means of avoidance. The list of what we *couldn't* talk about grew larger all the time. Phony Florida elections. Secret American torture camps. "Intelligent design." A far-from-intelligent president who wanted to amend the Constitution to insure that wicked folks like Ben and me would never receive equal treatment under the law.

The truth was that I had long ago stopped caring what the biologicals thought about me, but I had never stopped accommodating their nonsense. It was a nasty old habit not easily broken—making them all feel as comfortable as possible. I gazed around the room, looking for an easy route back to the banal. I found it in a large kitschy print over the fireplace: a woodland chapel at night, its windows ablaze with a golden glow.

"That's very nice," I said. "Is that a new acquisition?"

Lenore beamed with pride. "It's a Thomas Kinkade. You know, the Painter of Light? Irwin gave it to me for Christmas."

Irwin puffed up like a partridge. "*That* one set me back big time," he said. "Lemme tell you."

That night, after dinner at the Outback, we returned to Inn Among the Flowers and decided to hit the sack early. The day had been draining for both of us. Ben was toweling off from a long shower when he tossed a low-grade thunderbolt my way:

"Why didn't you tell me your brother was hot?"

I took that in for a moment, stretched out on the bed, then looked up from a pamphlet on Disney World and the Epcot Center. "Because he's not," I said evenly.

"C'mon. I know he's your brother, but you must be able to—"

"What exactly is it that turns you on? The comb-over? The beer gut? The Banlon shirt?"

Ben laughed. "His gut's no bigger than yours."

"Well . . . technically maybe."

"He's just a big rugged guy, that's all. Sort of a Suit Daddy. A countrified Suit Daddy. There are whole websites for those guys."

"I'm sure," I said. "Countrified Suit Daddy dot com."

He flopped on the bed next to me, naked and spicy-smelling. “He looks like somebody you’d see at an interstate rest stop looking for a little Brokeback action.”

“Well, thank you for that,” I said, rolling my eyes at him. “Thank you for that truly revolting new spin on my brother.”

Ben waggled his eyebrows. “I’d like to have a truly revolting spin on your brother.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!”

He laughed and kissed my shoulder. “All other things being different.”

“Thank you,” I said grimly.

“But if I met him at a bar, say—”

“He doesn’t drink,” I shot back. “He doesn’t even cuss anymore. Lenore has dragged his sorry ass to Jesus.”

“Apparently,” said Ben.

“He used to be kinda fun, you know. I mean—an asshole sometimes—but fun. Now he reminds me of our father at his worst. Especially when he was talking to Sumter.”

Ben looked at me dreamily, rubbing my belly in silence for a moment.

“You think he’s one of us?”

“Who? *Irwin*?”

A chastising swat. “No . . . Sumter.”

I rolled on my side and grinned at him. “He *is* kind of a flamer, isn’t he?”

Ben grinned back. “Pretty much.”

“That would be a hoot, wouldn’t it?”

“Not for Sumter,” Ben observed. “Not in this family. Did you see the look on your brother’s face when the kid was showing me his puppets?”

“Oh, man, how could you not?”

“He’s obviously worried about it.”

“Well . . . fuck him.”

“Is that what you were like when you were nine?”

I feigned indignation. “No! Are you kidding? I ran a very butch puppet show.”

Ben laughed. “I’m sure.”

“Strictly cowboys and Indians. And the cowboys always won.”

Ben moved closer, entangling his legs with mine. "I'd love to see where you lived. The orange groves and all. Just to be able to picture it."

"There's not much to see anymore," I said. "There's no home there now. Just a Home Depot."

He smiled. "But what did it look like?"

"Oh . . . dirt roads through the groves . . . white frame houses with lightning rods. Granddaddy was in walking distance."

"Like a Disney movie."

"More or less." I gave him a dark little smile. "Before Disney got here."

Ben smiled and sighed.

"There were these wooden stands out on the highway," I told him. "This two-lane blacktop that ran along our grove. They sold orange-blossom perfume to the Yankee tourists. We hated those stands back then . . . Mama said they looked common . . . but I'd love to see one now . . . the way it was then, I mean. I'm sure I'd think it was wonderful."

"You wanna go look for one," Ben asked, "after we visit your mother?"

"After we visit my mother," I replied, "I wanna find a gay bar and get shit-faced and stick my tongue down your throat."

"That would work, too," said Ben.

A Little Bit Blue

The Gospel Palms was located, not surprisingly, within spitting distance of a mall. The building was low and modern, the grounds modest but well tended. It might have passed for a small resort if not for the droning gray Muzak of the freeway and a Radio Shack visible through a tangle of palms and light poles. As Lenore turned the Little Witnesses Puppet Wagon into the parking lot, a pair of kids in Mickey Mouse ears were dodging the lawn sprinklers with lunatic glee. I had a terrible urge to join them.

“Listen,” said Lenore, turning off the engine. “Before we go in. Do y’all know about the blue bloater thing?”

“Nooo . . .” I said, frowning in Ben’s direction.

He shrugged. “Me neither.”

“Well . . . with emphysema patients, you know, they divide ’em up into pink puffers and blue bloaters.” She tilted her head and blinked her eyes in ladylike apology. “I know that sounds gross, but those are . . . you know . . . the actual terms they use.”

She seemed to be waiting for a response, so I said: “Okay.”

“Mama Tolliver’s been a pink puffer for a real long time. They call ’em that because they take these short little puffs when they breathe . . . and, you know, because of the color they get. Real . . . *rosy* in the face. The way she’s been until now, you know?”

I nodded. *Until now?*

“So,” sighed Lenore, drawing out the suspense, working me like one of her puppets. “Sometimes the people who have it are just pink, and sometimes they’re just blue, and sometimes . . . when it gets worse . . . they can change from one to the other.”

Perversely, I found myself thinking of a home pregnancy test. Or one of those sticks you pee on for the Atkins diet. “So,” I said, losing patience with my sister-in-law’s theatrics. “I take it she’s a blue . . . whatever . . . now?”

“Bloater,” she said. “Yes.”

“And what does that mean exactly?”

“It means that the arms and legs get all puffy and—”

“Bloated,” I said.

“Yes.” She wrinkled her nose in distaste. “And the skin gets sorta bluish.”

“Right.”

“Don’t worry,” Lenore said. “She keeps it covered up when she’s got company.”

“With makeup, you mean?”

She nodded ominously. “I’m afraid so.” She widened her eyes as if to suggest, ever so nicely, that I should brace myself for a major cosmetic atrocity. Then she climbed out of the Puppet Wagon and fussed briefly with her hair in the rearview mirror. “Don’t forget your pretty flowers,” she said, meaning the hydrangea in the backseat.

Spotting that plant on a table at Publix, I’d remembered how much Mama loved hydrangeas. There were half a dozen bushes blooming in our backyard every summer, some of them the size of pup tents. Mama would pull up a lawn chair when the sprinkler was on, just to smoke her Slims and watch those thirsty blue globes bobbing in the spray.

To a boy of seven—Sumter’s age, come to think of it—Mama seemed nothing less than a sorceress when it came to hydrangeas. I remember watching in amazement as she knelt in her cotton sundress to crucify the ground with rusty nails—a trick that she assured me would turn pink blossoms into blue ones before the year was out.

My love of gardening had come from this woman.

Her and Anna Madrigal.

The lobby of the Gospel Palms was tiny but efficient, presided over by a sweet-spirited portrait of a blue-eyed Christ delivering the Sermon on the Mount. There was an alcove for visitors and a mini-florist’s cooler—more like a vending machine, really—that dispensed carnation corsages in several unnatural colors. Behind the reception desk sat a balding Middle

Eastern man who nodded at Lenore as we passed, though she didn't even bother to slow down. I noticed the bumper stickers on his file cabinet—PROUD AMERICAN and SUPPORT OUR TROOPS—strategically positioned for the benefit of anxious visitors. *Poor bastard*, I thought. *Guantánamo Bay must seem awfully close.*

Outside Mama's room we held a brief powwow, where Ben, bless his heart, offered to take Lenore over to Starbucks so I could have some time with Mama before introductions were made. She was sitting up in a chair when I entered. Her face was made alien by a bulbous nebulizer mask, and her hair was a meticulous helmet of lavender blue, obviously done that morning. She'd been waiting for me, I realized.

Seeing me in the doorway, she yanked off the mask in embarrassment. "Mikey," she said, her voice more gravelly than I'd ever heard it. "Lenore was spouse to warn me."

"It's all right," I said, smiling at her. "I've worn one o' those myself." I was relieved to see that her makeup, while a little on the goopy side, was not nearly as gruesome as Lenore had suggested. It seemed to cover the blue, at any rate.

I set the hydrangea on the bedside table and knelt to hug her, entering the faint mist of her nebulizer. She was wearing an old polyester pantsuit, and her legs did seem to be swollen. She pulled my cheek against hers, then released me with a brisk pat.

"When did you get to be so gray?" she asked.

I smiled at her. "About the time you got to be heliotrope."

This was only meant to be affectionate, but a cloud passed over her face. "Did Lenore tell y'all . . . ?" She stopped to suck air through pursed lips as if—God forbid—she were toking on a joint. "Did Lenore . . . ssss . . . tell y'all I was turning colors?"

I was mortified. "Oh, no, Mama! I just meant your hair color."

"Oh." She patted the side of her Easter-egg do, almost girlishly proud of it. *When nothing else can be done*, I thought, *you can always do your hair.*

"I like it," I told her. "It's very becoming."

"Patreese did it. My new hairdresser . . . ssss . . . Black as the ace of spades . . . ssss . . . but very talented."

In the old days, I would have taken issue with her phraseology—and she would have accused me of overreacting—but it was way too late for all that

now.

Mama shot a nervous glance toward the door. “She didn’t . . . ssss . . . come with you, did she?”

I was confused. “Your hairdresser?”

“No . . . ssss . . . Lenore.”

“She’s over at the mall,” I said. “I wanted this to be just us.”

“I hope she didn’t . . . ssss . . . bring those puppets!”

I chuckled. “No . . . well, they’re in the van, but . . . I think we’re safe.”

“She like to bored us silly last week . . . ssss . . . Set up the stage in the dining room without so much as . . . ssss . . . a pretty-please to anyone . . . ssss . . . Then she went and . . . ssss . . . told the whole blessed world I’d turned blue.”

“Well, that’s not very discreet.” I could have been a lot more supportive, but I hadn’t been expecting an open invitation to lay into Lenore.

A sly light came into Mama’s eyes. “I never had so many . . . ssss . . . visitors in my life . . . ssss . . . all of ’em lookin’ for the Famous Blue Lady . . . ssss . . . I think the young’ns . . . ssss . . . were expectin’ a Smurf.”

When I laughed hard at that, she looked rather pleased with herself. Mama had gotten sassier in these last two decades without Papa. I’d always assumed she was trying to channel him a little, thereby taking up the slack in the pissing-and-moaning department.

She shook her head slowly. “I’ve never understood it.”

“What, Mama?”

“What Irwin sees in that . . . ssss . . . *Jesusy* woman!”

“Well,” I said, dragging up a chair and sitting down, “it’s a damn good thing *we’re* not married to her, isn’t it?” I reached for her hand and held it for a while. It was small and unnaturally plump and—yes—a little bit blue.

“Some of us don’t need puppet shows,” Mama declared with a righteous scowl. “Some of us would like to . . . ssss . . . worship the Lord in silence.”

I gazed down at her nebulizer mask, that ugly Muppet nose, lying abandoned in her lap. “Shouldn’t you be wearing that thing?”

She shrugged. “I can . . . ssss . . . take it or leave it.”

“Well, take it, then.”

She resisted.

“C’mon, lady. Humor me.”

She looked at me wearily for a moment, as if on the verge of saying something, then picked up the mask. “It’s just medicine . . . ssss . . . it doesn’t do anything.”

“Be that as it may . . . let me do the talking for a while.”

So Mama stayed on the nebulizer while I rattled on about the gardening business and the nice weather in Orlando and the landscaping at the Gospel Palms. My eyes, meanwhile, roamed the room for evidence of anything more substantive. I found it on a shelf by the window: the framed snapshot of Ben and me at Big Sur that I’d mailed to Irwin for Mama’s last birthday. I’d apparently shamed him into giving it to her.

She caught me looking at the photo and pulled off the mask. “So where did you hide . . . ssss . . . the young feller?”

Normally, she wouldn’t pronounce the word that way; she was being cute. She was doing her best Granny Clampett, to let me know she wasn’t nearly the rube I took her for. It was a sweet gesture but unconvincing; somewhere beneath all that white makeup and blue skin, the same old red-state heart was beating. Mama was a proud member of the Greatest, Generation—or at least its ladies’ auxiliary—and those folks don’t *have* to approve of you to love you. They can forgive you until the cows come home.

I gazed back at her calmly for a bit. “What bothers you more?” I asked. “The young part or the feller part?”

“Well,” said Mama, “we’ll just . . . ssss . . . have to see, won’t we?”

Ben returned from Starbucks minus Lenore. She had some shopping to do, he said, but she’d be back in an hour to pick us up. I figured she knew the limits of Mama’s energy and thought it best to give us a deadline. That was fine with me; I wasn’t even sure how well I could fill up the time. Ben made a valiant effort by dumping a handful of cellophane-wrapped cookies on the bedside table as soon as I’d introduced him to Mama. “I thought we should try these,” he said. “They’re madeleines. Ever had one?”

“Not from *Starbucks*,” I said, giving him a jaundiced look as I took one.

Ben mugged at me and turned back to my mother, who seemed to be studying his face for some killer final exam. “How ’bout you, Alice?”

Jesus fuck! He called her Alice.

Mama blinked at him for a moment, then reached primly for a madeleine. “Don’t mind if I do,” she said.

“Madeleines seemed appropriate,” Ben said, looking hopefully from mother to prodigal son as we nibbled away. “They’re for remembering, right?”

“Only if you’ve had one before,” I replied. “Only if you’re Proust.” I shared a private grin with him. “My madeleine would be a Moon Pie.”

Ben laughed.

“That’s a big fib . . . and you know it.” Mama was eating and talking at the same time, which was something of a stretch. Madeleine crumbs had assembled unlawfully in the corners of her mouth. “I never . . . ssss . . . fed you boys Moon Pies in my life.”

I chuckled. “I didn’t say you fed us. I said I ate them.”

“I’ll tell you another thing . . . ssss . . . I know who Proust is . . . ssss . . . so don’t you get snooty with me.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Where’d you get ’em?”

“What?”

“The Moon Pies.”

“The Esso station down on the highway. Mr. Grady with the drool rag. Same place I got the key ring with the wiggly naked lady inside.”

Mama was fierce. “I don’t remember any . . . ssss . . . key ring.”

“I don’t know why not,” I said. “You confiscated it. You said you never wanted to see me with a naked lady again as long as you lived.”

Her mouth went slack. “I never said . . . ssss . . . any such thing!”

“Well,” I said darkly, “it’s how *I* heard it.”

“Michael.” Ben was using the careful intonation of a kindergarten teacher. “Stop with the Norman Bates, please.”

“She knows I’m kidding,” I said, slipping my arm around Mama’s shoulders.

Sulking, Mama smoothed the front of her blouse. “Don’t think you can . . . ssss . . . blame me for your”—she searched for the right word—“good times.”

“My good times,” I echoed to Ben. “Blame her for my good times.”

“Give it a break,” he said. “Who’s Mr. Grady with the drool rag?”

“He worked at the gas station,” I said.

“He had a condition, “ Mama added.

“So I gathered,” said Ben.

“He was sort of a popular freak show for us kids,” I said. “He had this long string of drool—”

“Ugh,” said Ben.

“I know,” said Mama, looking slyly at my husband. “You could never buy a blessed thing out of a wrapper.”

It took him a moment to recognize her humor, but he finally smiled. “You’re a pistol, aren’t you, Alice?”

He could not have pleased her more. She smiled at him faintly, then turned back to me. “How did you ever meet . . . ssss . . . such a gentleman?”

I was feeling so comfortable by then that I almost brought up the website, but I thought better of it. “Just lucky, I guess.”

“I was lucky, too,” Ben told her.

Mama caught the look that passed between us. “Is that so?” she asked him.

He returned her gaze. “Yes, ma’am. It is.”

Their eyes stayed locked for a while before she turned back to me. “Why don’t you . . . ssss . . . go out and play?”

“What?”

“You heard me,” she said, shooing me with a plump pastel hand.

I spent the time in something called the Prayer Gazebo, which was just what it sounds like: a gazebo in the form of a miniature chapel. It wouldn’t function well as either, it seemed to me, but there were nice cushions that kept me comfortable while I was killing time. I was still killing it, by the way, when Lenore came back to pick us up.

“What happened to Ben?” she called.

“He’s inside with Mama.” I rose and walked toward her out of the gazebo.

I caught the raw scent of new-mown grass and felt suddenly, curiously buoyant.

“What are they talking about?” Lenore asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Oh . . . *now*.”

“I’m serious,” I said. “I’m clueless.”

Lenore pursed her lips. “Mikey, listen, I don’t know what y’all are up to, and I don’t wanna sound like some rhymes-with-witch, but Mama Tolliver can’t take any stress right now . . . and just because y’all’s political agenda means tellin’ the whole blessed—”

“It was *her* idea, Lenore!”

Lenore looked satisfyingly blank.

“Mama *asked* to be alone with Ben.”

“She did?”

“Yes. And lay off that agenda crap, Lenore. I hear a lot more about *your* agenda than you ever hear about mine.”

“Oh, hush,” she said. “We need to figure this out.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s up to somethin’ . . .”

I just shrugged. “I think it’s kinda sweet.”

“Listen, if you think for one minute that she’s in there givin’ him her blessing on your . . . let’s just say it, Mikey . . . cradle robbin’—”

“Oh, please,” I said. “We’re not asking for her approval. Or yours, for that matter.”

Lenore’s faced clouded with thought. “What is it, then? She just met him, didn’t she? Doesn’t that make you a little nervous?”

“I’d be more nervous, frankly, if it were Irwin.”

Lenore frowned. “Irwin and Mama Tolliver?”

“No. Irwin and Ben.”

I gave her a grin to let her know that I wasn’t serious, but it didn’t seem to help. “What are you talking about?” she asked, her frown growing deeper.

“Ben thinks he’s hot.”

“*Hot?*” She drew the word out to at least three syllables. “*Irwin?*”

“I know,” I said. “There’s no accountin’, is there?”

Lenore was dumbstruck, somewhere just short of laughing or screaming.

“It was just a remark,” I added. “He’s not trying to bag him. Don’t worry.”

“Well . . .” She started to say something but stopped.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. You made me forget. You always do that.” She turned and started striding toward the building. “C’mon, I gotta be at Curves by two.”

The War at Home

While they'd never been close, Mama and Lenore had been confidantes for decades—a paradox that's not uncommon among Southern women. Lenore had been Mama's wailing wall in the matter of her gay son—and later, of course, her *dying* gay son—and they had borne those crosses together like good Christians. So I couldn't imagine what could possibly have driven Mama to find her daughter-in-law too "Jesusy" these days. I had a feeling Ben might know already, but I didn't dare pump him until Lenore had dropped us off down the block from our B&B and rounded the corner out of sight.

"So what did your girlfriend want?"

Ben's smile was more careful than I expected. "Just to talk."

"I thought that's what we were doing."

He took my arm sweetly, naturally, and walked us to Inn Among the Flowers. I've lived too long not to fret about displays of male tenderness when they happen in . . . oh, say . . . the South, so I took note of the trio of baggy-panted teens slouching toward us down the palm-lined sidewalk. They passed without comment, though, causing me to wonder if this was actual progress—or if they'd just seen a guy being nice to his dad.

"So what's going on?" I asked Ben, returning to the mystery at hand.

He hesitated. "She needs your help with something."

"And she couldn't ask me herself?"

Arriving at our room, he slipped the key into the door. "She thought you'd be more likely to listen to me." He pushed open the door, turning to me with a crooked smile. "Plus she thinks I'm a gentleman, remember?"

(That's another thing that annoys me about Southern women: they always work through the spouse.)

“Don’t get too grand about it,” I said, following him into the room. “That was her backhanded way of saying that I’m *not* a gentleman.”

We sat on the edge of the bed and, almost simultaneously, tore at the Velcro of our Tevas. Ben turned and gazed at me soberly, then sighed and took the leap. “Here’s the deal, sweetie: she wants to give you durable power of attorney.”

I blinked at him for a moment, totally uncomprehending. “What do you mean? For a will or something? There can’t be much of an estate.”

Ben shook his head. “For health care.”

“But Irwin and Lenore have always—”

“I know . . . but she wants *you* to handle it now . . . and to sign something to that effect.”

“But . . . why?”

Ben hesitated, assembling his words. “Her lungs are pretty much shot. They won’t get any better. She could last for another few months, but . . .”

He didn’t finish, but none of this was news to me. I couldn’t understand why he was still treading so lightly.

“Once her lungs go,” Ben went on, “they could put her on a respirator indefinitely, but . . . she doesn’t want to be around at any cost. And she’s afraid that . . . left to their own devices . . . your brother and Lenore . . .”

I finished the thought for him: “. . . wouldn’t let her die.”

He nodded slowly. “Yep.”

“Jesus,” I murmured.

“Pretty much,” he said.

A long leaden silence.

“Has she *told* them that?” I asked. “What she wants, I mean.”

“No.”

“Why not? It’s worth a shot. You never know if—”

“She’s sure they wouldn’t go for it. Especially Lenore.”

“She asked her specifically, then?”

Ben shook his head. “They used to watch Terri Schiavo together.”

“Motherfucker,” I said. “Of *course*.”

You must remember Terri Schiavo, the woman in the “persistent vegetative state” whose parents were fighting to keep her that way. Her husband had petitioned to have her feeding tube removed, and fundamentalists everywhere were outraged, Governor Jeb Bush among

them. When permission was finally granted, the faithful gathered around their sets for a protracted deathwatch, a sideshow that proved so popular that the network tried it again several days later with the pope. But an old man shuffling into oblivion, however cute he might be, lacked the sheer gladiatorial drama of a good plug-pulling.

“Lenore would bring lunch to the Gospel Palms,” Ben explained, “and her and your mom would watch Fox-TV every afternoon. It was sorta their soap opera. Lenore would get so worked up she’d talk back to the set. She said that letting someone die like that was worse than abortion. Even if they want to die. Even if they requested it.”

I could feel my face burning. “And how does she feel about slaughtering children for oil? Does that offend her Christian principles?”

Ben was waiting indulgently for me to return to the war at home.

“So all I have to do is sign something?”

He nodded. “She had a lawyer draw it up. She asked me to be one of the witnesses. She wants you to sign before Irwin and Lenore get wise.”

“This doesn’t mean . . .” I just couldn’t find the right way to put it. “I mean . . . she’ll be comfortable, won’t she?”

Another nod. “They can make it that way.” He reached over and held my arm. “Nothing different will be happening, sweetie. Things will just . . . take their course naturally. She just doesn’t want the respirator.”

“Gotcha.”

“Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I guess I should call her.”

He shook his head. “I told her you’d do it. We’re gonna sign the papers on Thursday.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You’re way ahead of me, aren’t you?”

He leaned closer and kissed me on the cheek. “Just beside you.”

I smiled at him. “This could get sticky, you know.”

“You think?”

“Well . . . they’ll put up a fight if they get wind of it. I’m sure of that.”

“Maybe,” said Ben, “but there’s nothing they can do about it. Once your mom’s made her wishes known.”

“I suppose.” I had a sudden, macabre image of Lenore brandishing her puppets at the Gospel Palms while Mama breathed her last natural breaths. I could hear those loathsome Little Witnesses accusing me, pointing their

little felt arms at the sinner from Sodom-by-the-Bay as the righteous assembled at Mama's bedside to sing hymns of devotion.

"She must hate it," I said, "that she has to turn to me."

"She doesn't have to," said Ben. "She wants to."

No, I thought, she *has* to. Everyone else has drunk the Kool-Aid.

Camouflage

Orlando's oldest gay bar, the Full Moon Saloon, was a few blocks from our B&B down Orange Blossom Trail. The place had been a hunting lodge when I was a kid, but now it catered largely to bears—specifically the Bears of Central Florida—whose headquarters (and hindquarters) could be found there. On certain nights of the week patrons were encouraged to wear leather, latex, or uniforms. This particular night was a Wednesday, so men in camouflage could buy domestic beers for \$2.25.

In my youth, and many years thereafter, camouflage would have meant the jungle-green Vietnam variety, but most of these guys were decked out in the muted buffs and grays of the troops in Iraq. One of them, a solid-looking black bear nearing fifty, was sporting that new computer-generated camouflage on which random pixilated shapes have replaced the old swirly shrubbery patterns.

"He might be real," I said to Ben.

"A real what?"

"Soldier. I don't think that pattern has hit the thrift shops yet."

Ben gave me a dubious look. "Why would he wear it here? I don't think that outfit is much of a fantasy for people who have to wear it for real."

"I guess not." I smiled at him, appreciating his practical wisdom. "I'll get the drinks. What'll you have?"

Ben, as you know, is alarmingly moderate when it comes to substances, so "What'll you have?" is always a challenge. "How 'bout a Lemon Drop?" he said.

"Is that what our brave men are drinking now?"

He goosed me. "You can skip the pansy-ass glass."

"Yes sir." I gave him a smart salute. "No pansy-ass glass, sir."

I wriggled my way to the bar, where a chunky bartender in a camouflage tank top obliged by serving the cocktails in whiskey glasses rimmed with sugar. “There ya go,” he said, setting them down. “Two butch Lemon Drops for the general.”

He was just teasing, or maybe even flirting, but, proud old queer that I am, I didn’t want him to think that I had masculinity issues about glassware—especially in a room full of faux soldiers. “The short ones are easier to handle,” I said. “In a crowd.”

“Gotcha,” said the bartender. “You from around here?”

“No,” I replied. “Well . . . yes . . . but not lately.”

“You sounded like you might be.”

“I grew up out on Abbot Springs Road. My family had some orange groves out there.”

The bartender shook his head. “Don’t think I know it.”

I gave him a crooked smile. “Don’t think I do, either.”

“Say what?”

“Nothing.” I left him a ten-dollar bill, then lifted the Lemon Drop glasses in a double toast. “Keep the troops happy,” I told him ruefully.

Two drinks later, the Full Moon was jammed, and, as usual, I was feeling both claustrophobic and disconnected. You wouldn’t think those two would go together, but they do for me, especially in a bar, where it’s all too easy to feel suffocated by nothingness. I was never a bar person, even as a young man; I preferred the wide-open spaces of the bathhouses, where willing members and stoned cuddling and a seven-grain sandwich with sprouts were never that far away. A noisy bar, on the other hand, is all posing and chaos; sooner or later I reach my limit and have to make a break for it, find some stars, breathe some clean night air, get Christina Fucking Aguilera out of my head.

So Ben and I retreated to a bench under a big live oak that must have been there when I was a boy and the place was exclusively dedicated to the joy of killing animals. From this distance the pounding music in the Full Moon sounded almost bittersweet, like an orchestra heard across a lake. The actual moon was far from full—just a little nail paring caught in the branches—but it was lovely. My body was starting to remember the precise feel of a balmy Florida night—that easy, velvety containment.

Ben slid closer, tucking a palm between my thighs. “This is better,” he said.

“Ain’t it?”

“Are you okay?”

I didn’t speak right away. “You know what gets me?”

“What?”

I searched for the best way to frame it, the best way not to sound like a monster. “People always say, ‘*Of course* you love her, you have to, she’s your mother,’ but that kind of love can die as easily as any of the others. It has to be fed by something.”

“She loves you, Michael.”

“Not enough to question her preachers.”

“Well—”

“You know they hauled her to the polls . . . oxygen tank and all . . . so she could vote for Bush one more time? The guy who wants to protect marriage from you and me. And they expect us to act like everything’s fine, like they’re not *really* waging a holy war against us. And what do I do? I make it easy for them. I’m a good boy and joke about speedboats and alligators and Mr. Grady with the drool rag.”

Ben smiled benignly, letting me vent.

“I’ve had thirty years of forgiveness,” I said. “I’m fucking over it.”

Ben nodded. “I’m sure.”

“She’s spent all that time trying not to know who I am, and now she’s entrusting me with her death. I should feel touched or something, but I don’t. I don’t feel much of anything. I let her go a long time ago. I’ve done my mourning already.”

Ben kept his eyes on the moon. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“I mean it,” I said. “I wish I didn’t, but I do. “

Ben just shrugged and smiled. “There is no fifth destination.”

This takes some explaining. Last year I bought a Prius, one of those cute, high-butted hybrids that are multiplying like rabbits in the streets of San Francisco. As you might imagine, I love how it saves on gas and cuts pollution. I also love its eerie silence at stoplights and its wacky rearview camera and that disembodied voice—female, elegant, and a little bossy—who can somehow lead us back to Noe Hill (beguilingly labeled HOME)

from anywhere in the country. During our trip through the Southwest, Ben and I grew so familiar with that voice that we named her Carlotta—well, all right, *I* did—after “the mad Carlotta” from *Vertigo*, because our own lady of mystery can sound downright loony sometimes.

One night, for instance, when we were driving home from a trip to Tahoe, there was a serious chill in the air, so Ben poked the little face on the steering wheel to call Carlotta.

“After the beep,” she said, “please say a command.”

So Ben said: “Seventy-two degrees.”

And Carlotta replied: “There is no fifth destination.”

“What did she say?” asked Ben.

“She said there is no fifth destination.”

He chuckled. “Well, that’s real helpful.”

“I don’t think you waited long enough after the beep.”

“Well, okay,” said Ben, “but why was that in there in the first place. *There is no fifth destination?* If that’s the answer, what’s the question?”

Intrigued by this conundrum, I told him to push the button again. He did so, reluctantly, and Carlotta returned. “After the beep,” she said, “please say a command.”

I leaned toward the steering wheel. “Go fuck yourself,” I said.

“Pardon?” she replied.

“I said, eat a big one!”

Her voice, I swear, grew starchy: “System is showing beauty-shop icons.”

Ben hooted. “I think she just called you a queen.”

“I think she did, too . . . the tart.”

“Well, talk nice to her, then.”

“Push it again.”

“No, Michael. That’s enough.”

“C’mon. I wanna see how freaky she gets . . .”

“Honey, you can’t just sit here harassing machinery.”

“Why not? It’s a rare opportunity.”

From that moment on, “There is no fifth destination” became our all-purpose pronouncement. It sounded important, like something Gandalf might have uttered, yet it was patently ridiculous at heart. It became our

way of saying “Big deal” or “Who the hell knows?” or “Lighten up, for God’s sake, you won’t get out of this alive.”

Maybe we only get four destinations in life, and Carlotta’s trying to tell us not to be banking on the fifth, not to be wasting precious time on pipe dreams of eternity.

That’s the way I hear it, anyway.

“Do you smell something?”

We were still sitting on the bench under the oak tree, and Ben’s nose was tilted skyward. I followed his lead and noticed the same thing: the sweet, teasing pungency of marijuana. Tracking it to its source, I found a couple of bar patrons wreathed in smoke, standing in the shadows next to a Dumpster. “Man,” I said, “the scent of home.”

“Go get a hit,” Ben whispered. Since I haven’t traveled with grass—except sometimes by car in Northern California—since the “heightened security measures” of 9/11, my husband seems instinctively to feel my pain when I’m potless in a foreign city.

“I can’t,” I told him.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s rude, when they’re strangers. And they haven’t offered it.”

“Let’s just stroll by, then. I need to go to the bathroom, anyway.”

So we proceeded to stroll, ever so casually, until one of the tokers—the shorter of the two—was startled by the sight of us and palmed the joint with guilty efficiency.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “We’re from San Francisco.”

They laughed uneasily. They were both in their forties, both in polo shirts and chinos, both gazing carnivorously at Ben. I’m used to this, of course, and these two weren’t in the least threatening, since neither one of them was exactly embracing his daddyhood. Their highlighted hair and fake tans (visible even in the dark) betrayed just how hard—and how long—they’d been clinging to the conceit of youth. And it’s not Peter Pan who makes little Ben’s heart beat faster; it’s Captain Hook.

These guys seemed pleasant enough, though—especially when the shorter one held out the joint. “Would you care to partake?” His voice was Southern and smooth as sorghum. I found it familiar and comforting and deeply repellent.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said, matching his Victorian formality before sucking the blessed weed into my lungs.

“What about you?” the taller one asked Ben.

“No, thanks,” Ben said. “You guys go ahead.”

I handed the joint back to the taller one. “He’s disgustingly clean.”

The shorter one locked his eyes on Ben. “Well, good for you. You stay that way.” His tone was slightly patronizing, as if he were addressing someone’s teenage brother. He flashed an empty Tom Cruise smile. “Are y’all friends or something?”

“No,” I said evenly. “We’re a couple.”

He blinked at me for a moment. “Well,” he said, raising an eyebrow as he took the joint from the shorter one. “Didn’t *you* hit the jackpot.”

Before I could compose a sufficiently punishing answer, Ben had taken care of things. “I think we both did,” he said.

“Of course,” said the taller one, scolding his partner with a glance.

“We were married at City Hall,” I told them, changing the subject.

“That’s great,” said the taller one. “We couldn’t do that, of course, but . . . our pastor gave us a commitment ceremony.”

I was surprised—and impressed—to hear that. “Around here, you mean?”

“Yep. Tully Memorial Baptist.”

“Well, I’ll be,” I said. Three days back in Central Florida and I was already sounding like Mammy Yokum.

The shorter one sucked on the joint with a vengeance, making almost the same noise my mother made with her nebulizer. “We quit that congregation.”

“Why?” asked Ben.

“Well, the pastor started preaching about how all religions are the same and how (ssss) they’re all just guidelines for goodness and the Buddhists are just as good as we are and shit like that. Well, call me old-fashioned, but (ssss) when I accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal savior (ssss) I didn’t sign up for no Buddhism.” He handed the joint to the taller one, then turned back to us. “I mean, can you imagine such a thing?”

I didn’t dare catch Ben’s eye for fear of uncontrollable smirking. “Oh, well,” he said, struggling for something to say, “I can see how . . . so it was sort of . . . a question of —”

He was floundering pitifully, so I helped in my usual way—by interrupting. “I think I see what you mean,” I said to the shorter one. “If you join a spiritual discipline . . . whatever it is . . . you expect to be given the purest version of it.”

“*Thank you*,” said the shorter one. “I told that pastor we wanted all Jesus all the time or he could just keep his damn collection plate. We’d rather spend it on shoes.”

This time he’d meant to be funny, so Ben and I laughed, grateful for the release.

“He really did say that,” said the taller one, terribly proud of his tell-it-like-it-is partner.

“Do y’all live around here?” I asked.

“Not far,” said the taller one. “Winter Garden. We’ve got a condo there.”

The shorter one nodded. “We’re moving to Naples, though, just as soon as we’ve got the cash.”

“Lucky you,” said Ben. “Italy’s wonderful.”

“This one’s in Florida,” I explained with a crooked smile.

“Oh. Right. Of course.”

“On the Gulf,” said the taller one. “It’s real pretty there, and the beaches are fabulous. White sand as far as you can see.”

“And white *people*,” said the shorter one. “It’s the whitest place in the state. Call me old-fashioned, but I could use some of that right now.”

There was dumbfounded silence from the two of us, so the taller one looked at me earnestly and attempted an explanation. “Our Miata got broke into last week.”

Another long silence.

“You know what,” Ben said at last. “I’ve really gotta pee.”

Back in the bar, we finally released a barrage of groans and giggles. “Damn,” said Ben, “what you won’t do to get high.”

“Hey. You’re the one who told me to do it.”

“Where do they make queens like that?”

“I dunno.” I thought about it for a moment. “The Drama Club at Bob Jones University?”

Ben laughed. “Guess there has to be one, huh?”

“I swear, if it weren’t for Mama I’d be on the next plane out of here.”

“You don’t like it here?” This question came from somewhere behind us, startling us both. We turned to find the burly black bear in the pixelated fatigues, smiling broadly. The name JOHNSON was stitched in black above his breast pocket.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, “no offense.”

“None taken,” he said.

“We just met some assholes,” Ben put in. “It’s nothing to do with Orlando.”

“That camouflage is trippy,” I said, changing the subject. “That’s the real deal, isn’t it?”

The guy nodded. “Yeah.”

“So your name is really Johnson?”

“Yeah, but that’s not—”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell, right?”

He chuckled. “Hell, no, honey. I’ll tell you anything you want. That’s my name, but I don’t do war—I do hair.”

Okay, shoot me for stereotyping, but I would never have taken him for a hairdresser. Aside from his offhanded use of “honey,” there was nothing especially fey about him. He was more like some languid, gum-chewing UPS man whose forearms make you weak in the knees while you’re trying to sign that little Etch-a-Sketch thing.

“Good,” I told him. “Then we don’t have to worry about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know . . . dying in that asinine war.”

He regarded me for a moment, as if composing a response, but apparently thought it better to head in a different direction. “Y’all are partners, right?”

“Right,” said Ben.

“But you go to bars together?”

Ben shrugged. “It feels good to cuddle in a crowd.” His arm was already around me, so he pulled me closer for emphasis. I knew what he meant, of course. A public display of affection—in the right place—can feel like a public benediction.

The guy appraised us both, looking from one to the other with an intensity that was a little unsettling. “You look really hot together.”

“Thanks,” said Ben, blushing furiously.

“It’s obvious what you’ve got with each other,” the guy said, looking at me. “I can feel it from here. It’s like standing by a campfire.”

I started to make a lame crack about being flamers—largely out of nervousness—but our admirer had turned his electric gaze back to Ben. “So he’s your daddy, huh?”

Ben gave him that patented gap-toothed grin. “Sometimes,” he said. “And sometimes I’m his.”

The guy nodded. “I hear you.”

“Nothing formal,” I added. “No leashes or collars.”

That got a laugh from him. “Do you guys ever . . . ?”

He chose not to finish this question.

“Ever what?” I asked.

“No big deal,” he said. “Take it easy, my brothers.”

Then he headed off to the bar.

Okay, here’s the thing: Ben and I had never had a three-way. Not together, anyway. We’d never made a rule against it or anything; in fact, we’d always considered it a pleasant possibility one of these days, when the circumstances were right. Like, say when we’re traveling together and a long way from home and it’s someone we’re both attracted to who’s attracted to both of us and who we’re never likely to see ever again.

“Okay,” I said as soon as he was gone, “one of us has to say it first.”

“He’s fucking hot,” said Ben.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Was he hitting on us,” Ben asked, “or just admiring our marriage?”

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe he’s just the Welcome Wagon here.”

“Maybe. My wagon sure feels welcomed.”

Ben laughed. “I think he might wanna play.”

“Yeah . . . with *you*.”

“C’mon. You heard all that daddy talk.”

“He was getting off on the idea of *you* with a daddy.”

“He was practically slobbering on you, sweetie.”

“Really?” I squeaked, sounding decidedly undaddylike.

“Yes.”

“Well, what should we do?”

Ben shrugged. “Are you sure you want to?”

“I guess so,” I said. “If you do.”

“He’s awfully nice,” said Ben. “I mean, he seems like a decent guy.”

“He does, doesn’t he?”

Ben chuckled. “Listen to us.”

“Shall we go ask him?”

“Now, you mean?” He glanced across the room to the far end of the bar, where the object of our lust was standing alone in a pool of blue light.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“Well . . . as long as it’s okay with you. I don’t wanna fuck things up between you and me.”

“That’s why it’s okay,” I told him, cupping my hand against his cheek.

So, with eyes on the prize and hearts pounding in unison, we made our way across the room, only to be thwarted by the pot-smoking Jesus queens from Winter Garden. “Hi, guys!” the short one yelled, grabbing Ben’s arm.

“Oh . . . hi,” said Ben with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

“Good stuff, right?”

It took me a moment to realize he meant the pot. “Oh . . . yeah . . . thanks, it’s great.”

“Nice easygoing buzz.”

“Yes,” I replied vacantly.

“Lonnie’s cousin has grow lights in his garage.”

I presumed that Lonnie was the taller one, but this was no time to inaugurate introductions. Over at the bar, Mr. Johnson was pulling on a brown leather flight jacket in preparation for takeoff. Ben noticed this, too, and signaled his distress with a not-too-subtle jerk of his head.

“So where are y’all staying?” This was the taller one, gazing pointedly at both us. “With friends or somethin’?”

“At a motel,” Ben said. “His family lives here, but we’d rather . . . you know . . .” He let the thought evaporate, too distracted to continue. Mr. Johnson was zipping up his jacket, slapping down coins for the bartender.

The shorter one was on us now. “We’ve got plenty of room at the condo.” He smiled luridly. “And plenty more weed.”

By now Mr. Johnson was headed straight for the door.

“You know what?” Ben said. “I’ve gotta catch our friend before he gets away.” He turned and gazed at me pointedly. “I’ll be right back, honey.” And he hurried toward the door, throwing me to the Christians.

“Which one is your friend?” asked the tall one.

“Uh . . . just that guy down there.”

“The black one?”

“Yeah.”

Ben had caught up with Mr. Johnson and they were talking. Or rather Ben was talking while Mr. Johnson listened intently. I tried to focus on the Jesus queens, I really did—since I was about to decline their offer of a bacchanal at the condo—but my mind was full of the gripping silent movie across the way.

“How do you know that guy?” the short one asked.

“Uh . . . what?” *They were leaving now, Ben and Mr. Johnson, heading out the door together.*

“That guy. How do you know him?”

“Oh, just . . . from around. He’s an old friend.”

“I thought you were from San Fran.”

“Well, yeah, but—” I knew that Ben was just presenting our offer in a quieter place. I knew that, and I trusted him. I knew he wouldn’t be snogging Mr. Johnson until I was there snogging him, too. And I knew that if Mr. Johnson proposed sex with Ben without the participation of yours truly, Ben would politely decline—and probably never tell me what the deal breaker had been. I knew all of that about my amazingly thoughtful husband, and I was still a wreck.

“So . . . does that sound like a plan?”

The Jesus queens were both blinking at me expectantly, though the question had come from the shorter, brasher one.

“Uh . . . I’m sorry . . . what?”

“Coming to our place for a nightcap.”

“The two of you,” added the taller one.

This time their meaning was unavoidable. “Oh . . . right . . . thanks but . . . I think we’re gonna turn in early tonight. Jet lag.” The door was opening again. Ben stepped into a patch of light and beckoned me to join him.

“Sorry,” I told the Jesus queens. “I think my honey’s ready to split.”

“That’s too bad,” said the taller one.

“Y’all take care,” I said, beating a hasty retreat.

When I reached Ben, he was grinning in sheepish apology. “Sorry,” he said, pecking me on the mouth. “I figured we needed to act decisively.”

“So what’s the deal?” I asked.

“He’s meeting us at the B&B.”

“Did you tell him I’m positive?”

“Yep.”

“And he’s cool about . . . both of us?”

“More than cool. Said he wouldn’t dream of breaking up the set.”

I smiled. “Did you grab his ass?”

Ben turned Huckish on the spot. “Maybe just once.”

“Hey . . . go for it.”

“I grabbed it for both of us.”

“Sure you did.”

“I asked him not to come till eleven,” Ben added. “So your pill can kick in.”

“What a husband.” I thought about that for a moment. “Is that what you told him?”

“Of course not.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you had,” I said. “I’m not Viagraphobic.”

Ben squinched his eyes at me. “That’s not a word, is it?”

“I hope not.”

“It might be one back home,” Ben said. “We’ve been gone for almost a week.”

“Yeah . . . by now there’s probably a *Council* on Viagraphobia.”

“Stop.” Ben laughed. “You can’t dis the city when you’re abroad.”

“Is that a rule?”

“Yes. It’s like talking about her behind her back.”

“Are we abroad? Is that where we are?”

“We’re certainly not home,” said Ben.

No, I thought. *We certainly aren’t.*

The Chances of This

For some reason, Ben and I both felt compelled to tidy up for Mr. Johnson. We tore through the place like dervishes, fluffing pillows and flinging socks into suitcases and rearranging toiletries around the sink. We might have been a couple of nervous hotel maids confronted with a surprise inspection from Leona Helmsley.

“You first in the shower,” I said as Ben helped me fold the polyester bed cover and stash it in the closet. So he grabbed a razor and the red rubber travel douche from his shaving kit and headed for the stall. He was in there for a while—shaving his balls, I figured—so I made a mental note to do the same. If you’re going to barber down there at all, you’d better be faithful about it. A little stubble may be forgivable in a marriage, but it’s downright inhospitable when you’re—how shall we put this?—receiving guests.

When Ben reemerged, smelling deliciously of blue malva shampoo, he was dressed in gray boxer briefs and a white V-neck T-shirt.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” I asked.

He looked affronted. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. Just wondering about the dress code.”

Ben fondled my crotch. “Wear your sweatpants. You look hot in those.”

“All righty, then.” I looked around the room. “Have you seen my cock ring?”

“In the soap dish.”

I swear, Mikey, you’d lose your head if it wasn’t attached.

This wasn’t Ben but my mother, spinning one of her golden oldies just when needed the least. I wondered if her death would finally release me from this telepathic nagging. Or if I was doomed to spend the rest of my life in Norman Bates territory.

“Better get a move on,” Ben said. “He’ll be here in five minutes.”

But half an hour later, after I’d shaved and showered and squeezed into my finest brushed stainless-steel groin jewelry, Ben and I were still perched tentatively on the edge of the bed, awkward as wallflowers at an ROTC ball. The lamp we’d left burning to lend a sultry glow to the room was already—thanks to the Viagra—blazing with a brilliant blue-white intensity. Meanwhile, my growing hard-on was growing superfluous.

“You sure you told him the room number?”

“Absolutely.”

“And he seemed . . . amenable?”

Ben was amused by my wording. “Yes, he seemed amenable.”

“So . . . what? He got cold feet?”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe he just lost interest. Or got a better offer.”

Ben shrugged. “Who knows?”

“So what’s wrong with *us*? I’d fuck us in a second.”

He laughed.

“I’m serious. Don’t you feel abandoned?”

“It’s a three-way, honey. I don’t think two people can be abandoned.”

“Can’t they?”

“He might just be late, you know.”

I looked at the clock again. “Twenty-five minutes. Only hustlers can get away with that.” I considered that for a moment. “He’s not a hustler, is he? You’re not withholding something, are you?”

Ben turned and looked at me in amazement. “You think I bought us a hustler and didn’t tell you?”

“Well . . .”

“How pathetic do you think I think we are?”

I smiled. “Some people would see that as thoughtful.”

He looked at me again. “Why would you think he’s a hustler, anyway?”

“I don’t know. It sorta felt like he’d . . . targeted us. Like he’d been watching for a while before he jumped into the conversation.”

“I didn’t get that sense,” said Ben.

“Maybe I’m wrong, then.”

Ben smiled sympathetically. “Poor baby. You’re disappointed.”

“No,” I said. “Just annoyed.”

He gazed down at my tented sweatpants, then pulled down the waistband and stooped to give me a friendly lick.

“No,” I said. “I don’t need a mercy suck.”

He looked up, chuckling. “*Mercy suck?*”

“Well . . . whatever . . .”

Undeterred, Ben got down to business.

“Mercy,” I said, making him laugh with his mouth full.

And that, of course, was when Mr. Johnson knocked on the door.

I should stop calling him Mr. Johnson, I guess, since you may have figured it out by now. Ben and I certainly hadn’t. To us he was still what Quentin Crisp used to call—without reference to race, of course—The Great Dark Man: a mythical (and therefore slightly two-dimensional) object of desire. Which is probably why we jumped to attention like a pair of guilty schoolboys when we heard his sturdy knock at the door.

“Jesus,” I murmured, tucking the incriminating evidence under the band of my sweatpants.

“Well . . . better late,” said Ben, heading for the door.

“Wait!” I whispered. “Let this go down first.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It seems rude.”

Ben widened his eyes at me. “Did you learn that from Miss Manners?” He reached for the doorknob, so I sank to the bed again, hiding myself in the folds of the sweatpants. This probably made me look a little grand, like some pompous old top awaiting service, but that somehow seemed preferable to greeting him upright with flag already flying.

Ben opened the door. The guy was standing there looking mortified, still wearing those camouflage fatigues. “I’m sorry, fellas.”

“No sweat,” said Ben. “C’mon in.”

Our visitor, I noticed, shot a quick glance at Ben’s boxer briefs before following him into the room. “Can we get you something to drink?” I asked, remaining graciously seated like a dowager hostess. “There’s a soda machine on the landing.”

“No thanks,” he said.

“Did you have a hard time finding us?” I asked.

The guy just shook his head.

“I’m Michael,” I said, finally standing at half-mast, “and this is Ben.”

He shook our hands sheepishly, seeming, for some reason, far less comfortable than he had in the bar. “I’m Patreese,” he said. The name was exotic enough to have rung a bell immediately—or set off a whole carillon of recognition—but it didn’t.

Ben moved next to the guy and slipped an arm around his waist, as if to reassure him. I’d worried that the first sight of my sweetie with a stranger might make me squirm, but I found this gesture so gently hospitable, so typically Ben, that it actually put me more at ease. “We’re glad you came,” Ben said, while his other hand slipped into those high-tech fatigues to work Patreese’s nipple. Patreese moaned a little, then kissed Ben voluptuously on the mouth before doing the same to me. “Y’all are sweet,” he said.

Ben caught my eye with a private inaugural smile, then dropped to his knees and tugged Patreese’s cock out of the fatigues. He began to rearrange the voluminous foreskin with the tip of his tongue, but I caught only the briefest glimpse of this action since Patreese had responded to it by ramming his own tongue into my mouth. It stayed there for quite a while, so warm and invasive that it actually seemed to swell like an erection. When he removed it he said, “I hope it’s okay. I’m sort of a kiss pig.”

“No problem,” I said as I caught my breath.

Looking up at us, Ben removed Patreese’s cock from his mouth. “No problem here, either,” he reported, getting a big laugh from the troops.

Patreese suddenly seemed distracted. “I should tell you something.”

I’m used to this moment arising—what gay man isn’t?—so I tried to make it easier for him. “We always play safe,” I said, “if you mean that you’re positive.”

He shook his head. “No. It’s something else . . .”

We waited for the penny to drop.

“ . . . I do your mama’s hair.”

This simply did not compute.

Ben looked up at him, completely openmouthed—well, *almost* as openmouthed as he’d been a moment earlier. “What?” he murmured.

“I do his mama’s hair,” Patreese repeated. “At the Gospel Palms.”

In this moment of raw revelation, my mind raced back to my mother’s room at the rest home in Orlovista and the obvious pride she had shown in

her smart new pastel do: "Patreese did it . . . my new hairdresser . . . black as the ace of spades but very talented."

Somehow I managed to keep from saying "I thought you were a woman" to a man whose proud sea horse was still prancing in the vicinity of my husband's face.

"How'd you know who we were?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Ben, rising to his feet in obvious fascination.

"She's got a picture in her room," Patreese said. "Y'all by a waterfall. She talks about you all the time."

Ben and I swapped dumbfounded glances.

"She said you were coming to visit, and I recognized you in the bar."

"Jesus," said Ben. "What are the chances of *this*?"

Patreese shrugged. "There's not that many bars in Orlando."

I asked the obvious question. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"I wanted to suck some dick," he said with a sleepy smile. "That ain't gonna happen with your mama in the conversation. She takes too much explaining."

I liked the way he nailed that down. "That's the truth," I said.

"I felt bad about it later. It wasn't very sociable."

"Oh, I don't know," Ben said.

"I almost didn't come," said Patreese. "That's why I was late. Then I thought, fuck that shit. I need a break from her, and it might as well be y'all."

Ben chuckled. "How often does she get her hair done, anyway?"

"I don't just do her hair. I do her makeup, too."

"Oh," I said. "You cover up the blue."

"It's not that blue," he said. "It's not near as bad as she thinks it is. Somebody told her she was a blue bloater and . . . she got to worryin' about it."

Lenore, I thought. *It must have been Lenore.*

"She looks really good," I said, since it seemed to matter to him.

He nodded. "I like to work on old ladies. They appreciate it."

That was the worst possible segue for what happened next, but no one objected. Patreese knelt and nuzzled the mound of Ben's briefs, while pulling me closer by the crotch of my sweatpants. Within seconds he had us both in hand, squeezing our dicks together like an eager child introducing

her Barbie dolls to each other. Then he went down on both of us, one after the other, never neglecting either for long: a symphonic performance by a true multi-instrumentalist. Ben pulled my face into his and kissed me hungrily.

In a three-way, of course, there's always the danger that someone will feel left out, but Patreese didn't let that happen. I'm pretty sure he saw Ben as the brass ring on this merry-go-round, but I never felt unwelcome on the ride. By the time we were naked on the bed and both of them (at Ben's prompting) were sucking on my chest, I was feeling so generous that, once I'd shot my load, I grabbed a condom off the bedside table and rolled it onto Patreese's cock. Ben realized this was meant for him, and gazed at me in tender appreciation before grabbing a bottle of lube and going to work. He came on all fours, the little spunk bucket, never even touching himself, while Patreese was fucking him. I know because I was underneath, catching the splash and offering kisses and feeling flat-out wonderful. Patreese more or less fucked him into my arms. Ben stayed there for some time, laughing from the pleasure, his heart beating hard against my chest.

Then my cell phone rang in my suitcase. It's programmed to ring like an old forties telephone—like Barbara Stanwyck's, say, in *Sorry, Wrong Number*—and that always lends a certain jangly melodrama to the moment.

"Leave it," said Ben from the middle of this panting stack of men.

"Good idea," I said from the bottom.

"Nobody move," said Ben.

There was a brief silence, followed by the little groan Ben makes whenever someone pulls out of him. (Or at least when I do.)

"Sorry," said Patreese.

"That's okay," said Ben.

Patreese rolled off the pile and sat on the edge of the bed, skinning the condom off his cock. Then he took it to the bathroom and flicked it into the toilet.

"What's this?" he called.

"What?" I asked.

"In the toilet."

"Oh," said Ben, grinning. His head was on my chest now, while his hand roamed the familiar volcanic slopes of my belly. "That's an orchid."

"I got that much," said Patreese.

“They put one there every day,” Ben explained. “Sorta like a mint on the pillow. We flush it every night, but it keeps coming back.”

“One of those little extra touches,” I added, “that mean so very much at Inn Among the Flowers.”

Patreese stared down at this deeply Floridian floral offering. “It don’t look right somehow.”

“I know,” I said. “Especially with a condom on it.”

Patreese chortled and flushed the toilet and cleaned up at the sink. When he came back to the bedroom, he started gathering up his clothes.

“Hey,” I said. “Hang with us for a while.” I wanted him to know he didn’t have to fuck and run on our account, that we weren’t that kind of couple.

“Busy day tomorrow,” he said, pulling on a sock.

“Not with my mother, I hope.”

He chuckled. “My other job. A bachelorette party.”

Ben sat up on one elbow. “They get their hair done for that?”

“I strip for private parties,” Patreese explained. “That’s what *this* is for.” He was stepping into his fatigues now, stuffing all the goods back in. “Got a cop uniform, too.”

“No shit,” said Ben, apparently impressed by the rich array of employment opportunities available to a hairdresser here in the sovereign state of Disney.

Patreese grunted. “It ain’t worth the bus fare half the time.”

“Why not?” asked Ben.

Patreese shrugged. “I don’t care *how* big your dick is—if a sister’s got a plate of ribs in front of her, there ain’t no way you’re gonna hold her attention.”

Ben and I laughed raucously.

“I’m *serious*,” said Patreese, clearly tickled by our response and warming to his material. “I’m up there workin’ my ass off . . . just *flangin’* my stuff around. And they’re sittin’ down there in their nasty-ass press-on nails, pickin’ meat outta their teeth.”

Ben hooted again. “Tough crowd, eh?”

“Oh, the sisters say they like the mens . . .” Patreese drew out the last word with a histrionic hiss, so we’d know it wasn’t his own particular vernacular. “But they don’t like the mens near as much as the mens like the

mens.” He was tying his bootlaces, so he finished with a punctuating yank. “They don’t tip as good, either.”

He came to the bed fully dressed and wriggled between us until we became his naked bookends. There was something strangely intimate and sweet about holding him in his clothes. He lay there for a while, sighing a little, then kissed us on our foreheads and got up again, heading out. “Be well, my brothers,” he said at the door.

“You too,” we said in unison.

“Y’all make a nice couple.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll see you on Thursday,” he said. “When we sign that thing for your mama.”

It took me a while, but I gaped at him until I got it. “You’re the other witness?”

Patreese nodded. “You be nice to her, you hear?”

He opened the door and left, closing it behind him.

Ben turned to me and dropped his jaw dramatically. “Jesus. What are the chances of this?”

I told him he’d said that before.

“Yeah, well . . .”

“Do you think she put him up to it?”

“Who? *Your mother?*”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“For God’s sake, Michael. We were the ones who picked *him* up!”

Were we? I wondered.

Ben rolled over and nuzzled my neck. “You ascribe way too much power to her.”

Do I? I thought, staring up at the floral-patterned ceiling.

Her Raggedy Soul

The next morning Ben and I wolfed down a huge breakfast at the Denny's across the street. A touch of gluttony seemed a fitting follow-up to our late-night pig-out with Patreese. Besides, I rather liked the idea of ordering the Biscuit and Gravy plate in what remained of my beloved Southern homeland. Until I actually ordered it, that is.

"Will that be the *Senior* Biscuit and Gravy?"

Our waitress, a hefty young gum-chewing black woman, could easily have been one of Patreese's bachelorettes.

"No," I told her with a measured smile. "I don't think I qualify quite yet."

"How old are you?"

I hadn't been asked this in a place of business since I was seventeen, when I tried, unsuccessfully, to buy a fifth of Jack Daniel's at a liquor store across the highway from Mr. Grady's gas station. It was just as unsettling to be carded at the other end of my life, for a fucking biscuit, no less, but I answered as civilly as possible.

"I'm fifty-five."

The waitress nodded triumphantly, scribbling something on her pad, like she'd just guessed my weight at the country fair. "This is your lucky day, peaches."

Then she sashayed off, leaving me in the dust of her righteousness.

Ben picked up the big plastic menu and read the fine print. "She's right," he said. "Fifty-five and older."

I told him that was another reason not to live here.

He smiled crookedly. "I think this applies at *all* Denny's."

I took the menu from him and perused the Senior section: the Senior Omelette, the Senior Scramble, the Senior French Toast Slam. “Are the Senior meals any different from the regular ones?” I asked. “Do they come with a bib or something?”

Ben rolled his eyes at this useless display of gerontophobia. “You know,” he said, “if it bothers you that much, you can always pay full price.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” I said, laughing it off, since I was certain it didn’t bother *him*. It probably turned him on, in fact, that I’d just been certified an old guy by a leading family restaurant. Such is the nature of my greatest blessing. I know not to mess with it.

I reached across the table and took his hand. “That was so hot last night.”

“Oh, man,” said Ben, squeezing my hand.

“He was sweet, too.”

Ben nodded with a sleepy smile. “Definitely the right choice.”

“You’ll tell me when I start looking like a silly old fool, won’t you?”

“Fuck, no,” said Ben.

I grinned feebly. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud, actually.”

“You looked like a sexy daddy to me.”

Two tables away, an obese white woman stopped wiping her obese child’s face long enough to stare us down. Ben smiled at her pleasantly, then returned his gaze to me, still holding my hand. “Did you ever check your cell, by the way?”

I flashed on the night before and the phone call that had come just after we had. I fished the cell phone out of my jacket and checked the readout.

“It’s from Anna,” I said.

“Better check it,” he said.

All he meant was that Anna was old enough to require our attentiveness, but I still felt a sudden shiver of anxiety. That’s usual for me when I’m away from home for any length of time whatsoever. I expect all hell to break loose.

But Anna’s message was soothing: “Oh . . . uh . . . hello, dear, just sending my love. I hope you and Ben are having a lovely time. There’s no need to call unless you feel like it. Everything is fine here. Do give my love to your mother. Goodbye, dear.”

Sweet. Typically Anna in its gentility and thoughtfulness. Her sign-off had a finality that unsettled me, but I wrote that off to her general inexperience with leaving voice messages. On the other hand, when you're eighty-five years old, maybe you know to treat every goodbye as potentially your last. Maybe you're just more *conscious* by then.

It was too early to return her call, so I waited until mid-morning, when Ben was doing his yoga down in the motel's workout room. She answered on the first ring.

"Madrigal."

"It's me, Anna."

"Oh . . . dear. How lovely."

"It's good to hear you, too."

"I hope I didn't call at an inconvenient time last night."

"Not at all." I smiled to myself when I said that, but I meant it just the same. More than anything, sex with Patreese had been a well-deserved escape from the bullshit of the biologicals, so it struck me as sort of charming, really, that Anna's good wishes had reached us—shall we say?—post-climactically. It was like a transcontinental blessing.

"How is your mother doing?" she asked.

"No better," I told her, "but no worse."

"Ah . . . well."

"She seems to be in a good place, though. The home, I mean. Christian as all hell, but what can you do?"

"What *does* she do?" asked Anna.

"Not much," I said. "There's a man who comes by regularly to do her hair and makeup."

"Well, that's good," said Anna. "I know that's important to her." *How* she knew this, I couldn't tell you, given how little time she'd spent with Mama all those years ago. Maybe she just meant that women in general—and those who've successfully achieved womanhood—often appreciate the value of hair and makeup.

"He's a sweet guy," I said. "And when he's not doing hair, he strips."

Anna hesitated for a moment. "I take it you don't mean floors."

I laughed. "He gets nekkid for the ladies."

"Well, that must be a hit at the home."

I laughed. "It's just how he moonlights . . . far as I know."

“What a pity. How’s the rest of the family?”

“Pretty much the same. My brother’s still bragging about his boats. My sister-in-law’s still heavy into her Jesus puppets.”

She uttered a tolerant sigh. “Well, to each his own, dear. Have they been sweet to Ben?”

“Everybody’s sweet to Ben.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said.

“My seven-year-old great-nephew has a huge crush on him.”

“Indeed?”

“It’s platonic,” I told her, “but the kid is *definitely* a nancy boy.”

Anna paused for a moment. “Isn’t seven a little early to know who you are?”

“It wasn’t for me,” I said.

She took that in for a moment. “No,” she said softly, “not for me, either.”

“I’m worried about him,” I told her. “I think his grandfather’s on to him. He’s been making noises about boot camp.”

“*Boot camp*? For a seven-year-old?”

“It’s something they saw on *Maury*.”

“On *what*?”

“A TV show. Never mind. I think my brother was just thumping his chest.”

Anna’s wheels were already turning. “Get them to send him out here for the summer.”

I chuckled. “They’d sooner send him to Afghanistan.”

“No . . . really, dear . . . we could take him to the new museum. And Crissy Field . . . and the Exploratorium. The redwoods, for heaven sake.”

Anna hadn’t had a kid to raise since Shawna (unless you count the thirty years she’s been raising me), so it was touching to see how quickly she could still embrace her inner landlady. I loved the thought of nellie little Sumter basking in her all-forgiving aura, but she and I both knew she didn’t have the strength for it.

“Have you been keeping busy?” I asked.

“*Keeping* busy? That’s a terrible thing to ask someone.”

“Sorry.”

“Only the bored keep busy. I *am* busy.”

"I have no doubt of that."

"Brian and Shawna took me to see *The Black Rider* the other night."

"What's that?"

"A musical. Sort of. Tom Waits and William Burroughs, if you can imagine. Tuesday is acid night, apparently. The kids get high and take over the first six rows."

"And what decade was this?"

Anna giggled. "I know . . . *plus ça change*, eh?"

I could feel her glow warming me across the miles. It made me get serious for a moment. "You're doin' okay, though, aren't you?"

"Of course, dear."

"We'll be home in a few days. You can take *me* to the museum."

"It's a date," she said. "Then we'll get me a cat."

"Beg pardon, ma'am?"

"I'd like to go to the SPCA and adopt a beat-up old cat."

I smiled. "Very well."

"Someone to sit in the sun with me. Who doesn't want to go anywhere."

I knew this wasn't a veiled plea for sympathy. Anna doesn't veil anything beyond her head and an occasional lampshade. She would have been mortified, in fact, to know she'd come off as anything less than blithely self-contained.

But she did, somehow; somehow she sounded sad.

She had a cat when I met her. An old tiger tabby named Boris that prowled the mossy boardwalks of 28 Barbary Lane, slipping into windows at will. He didn't live with Anna—or anyone else, for that matter—but she considered him her own. She was in her mid-fifties then and already *grandedame*-ing it in kimonos with a houseful of tenants who felt privileged to live under her spell. I was one of them, of course. Another was Anna's biological daughter, the child left behind by—as Anna put it—the "lesser man" she used to be. Mona was restless and loving and funny and utterly impossible sometimes. She moved to England early in the reign of Princess Di and married a queer lord so he could get a green card and wag weenie in San Francisco. Whereupon Mona—well, Lady Mona, technically—began to take in lodgers at the rundown country house left behind by the

weenie-wagging lord. The place just climbed into her raggedy soul. At forty she adopted a teenager of Aboriginal descent and decided to stay for good.

Having lost her daughter to another country, Anna resigned herself to a life of vacations. I went over there a few times myself, since Mona and I had always been close. (We had roomed together once, and she had been my first lesbian fag hag.) When I saw her ensconced at Easley House, I realized how perfectly it suited her, and that somehow helped to shrink the planet she had put between us. Back in the city, I could still picture her clomping around in her wellies as she collected rent from the villagers. Or serving tea and shortbread in the Great Hall to goggle-eyed tourists from Texas. She had followed in her father's footsteps, our Mona, becoming a landlady *extraordinaire*.

I should have been better about keeping in touch, but I've never been a regular letter writer. Anna, of course, remained faithful in that regard, filling page after page of flimsy blue stationery with spidery lavender handwriting. When email came along a decade later, I mended my neglectful ways and began regular correspondence with hasbian@easleyhouse.co.uk, a handle Mona devised to suggest a lesbian who'd lately been straying with men. This was true only in the sense that once on Guy Fawke's Day she'd gotten loaded on Quaaludes (you can still get them in Switzerland—who knew?) and fucked her stonemason, a guy she claimed looked "too much like Brad Pitt to pass up." The hasbian label worked wonders, though. Half the dykes in the Cotswolds, many bearing pies and garden cuttings, showed up on Mona's doorstep in a fevered effort to return her to the labial fold. "Got me laid for weeks," she told me triumphantly.

There were live-in girlfriends from time to time, but none lasted very long. Mona was way too independent, and her life was full. It was Wilfred, Mona's adopted son, who called me with the news. He hated asking this, he said, but it would probably be better if someone told Anna in person. So one warm October afternoon, after brunch in the Castro, I walked her back to the Duboce Triangle and told her that her daughter, my oldest friend, had been undergoing treatment for breast cancer for the past two years but didn't want us to "make a big fuss about it." The late delivery of this bombshell angered Anna as much as it had me, and we agreed that we damn well would make a fuss about it if we wanted. Indignation had been our only shield against the nasty bitch slap of reality.

Anna had about five weeks with Mona; I was allotted the last five days, maybe because she knew me well. When I arrived in England, she was flying on morphine, so it went better than I'd imagined. She told me to fuck myself more than once, and said it with a smile on her face. It was quality time, as they say, which for Mona meant ranting and reminiscing and joking about Bill Clinton's dick. Several years later, when those planes hit the Twin Towers, I remember thinking how shrewdly she had timed her exit. Her big wounded hippie heart would not have prospered in this cold new climate.

She'd been gone for almost eight years, and her surviving parent wanted a cat.

Someone to sit in the sun with me. Who doesn't want to go anywhere.

Word One

On Thursday morning Ben holed up at Inn Among the Flowers with his laptop and a backlog of furniture orders, so I could be alone with Mama before signing the papers. When I arrived at the Gospel Palms, she was propped up in bed watching Bill O'Reilly on a TV set bolted to the ceiling. Her makeup seemed fresh, so I figured Patreese had already made his rounds. I wondered if he'd talked about meeting me and Ben, and, if so, how free he'd been with the details. He was a hairdresser, after all.

"Where's your friend?" Mama asked, meaning Ben.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the floor. "He's my husband, Mama."

She scowled at me.

"Irwin told you that, didn't he? That we got married a few years ago."

A long, brooding silence and then: "Don't be like that, Mikey."

All I could do was smile. Mama had been telling me not to be like that as long as I could remember. "All right. I won't be like anything."

She fussed with the tiny blue curls around her temples. "What do you . . . ssss . . . want with a husband, anyway?"

I laughed.

"They're nothin' but heartache," she added.

I scoured my mother's face for clues to her state of mind. In half a century of knowing this woman I'd never heard her speak a word against my father. I decided to be bold in return. "Why didn't you leave him, Mama?"

She recoiled visibly. "Watch your mouth, son."

"I mean it. Why didn't you?"

She fidgeted with the hem of the sheet. "I was going to, believe me."

“And?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “He died.”

I suppressed a smile; then I realized she found this funny herself.

“I reckon he saw it comin’,” she added dryly.

Papa had died of colon cancer in 1987—not that long ago in the general scheme of things. “You never considered it before then?” I asked.

Her lower lip stiffened. “I did more than . . . ssss . . . consider it.”

“You *left* him, you mean?”

She grunted and looked up at the big white face of Bill O’Reilly, hovering above us like a hot-air balloon. I found his aura of white-guy entitlement especially intolerable at that moment, so I reached for Mama’s clicker and turned him off.

“I was watchin’ that,” Mama said.

“When did you leave Papa?” I asked.

She sighed in the same put-upon way she used to sigh when I was twelve and asked her if she’d seen my neckerchief slide or knew where Irwin had left my bike. “Remember the summer . . . ssss . . . we drove you boys up to . . . ssss . . . Camp Hemlock?”

“Yeah.”

“I left him on the way home. After we dropped y’all off.”

“*How?* How did you leave him?”

“On the side of the road.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Mama, I have to say, looked a wee bit proud of herself. “He stopped to get a Nehi soda . . . ssss . . . and I just drove off and left him.”

I was grinning shamelessly. “I take it you went back for him.”

“I did not,” she said, smoothing the sheets. “I went to the Baptist retreat . . . ssss . . . at Blowing Rock. I didn’t get home for ten days.”

“Papa never told me this.”

She twisted her lips into a small, triumphant smile. “He was a proud man.”

“How did he get home?”

She shrugged. “Never told me.”

“Did he have to cook for himself?”

“I reckon.”

“Musta bought Moon Pies from ol’ Drool Rag.”

She let that go without a smile. "I needed some private time with the Lord . . . ssss . . . and it never cost Papa a cent."

"How'd you manage that?"

"Green Stamps," she said proudly.

"*Green Stamps?*"

"From the . . . ssss . . . Piggly Wiggly."

Green Stamps were Mama's personal currency back then. She'd sit in front of the TV at night with a wet sponge and fill up whole booklets with them, later redeeming them for toasters and curtains and, once, even an Electrolux vacuum cleaner. They offered her the illusion of wealth, since all she ever *really* bought were groceries.

I still didn't get it. "The Baptist retreat took Green Stamps?"

She shook her head. "I traded 'em in for a kitchenette set . . . ssss . . . and sold it to Mee-Maw." Mee-Maw was my grandmother, my mother's mother, who died in a car wreck in South Carolina a few years before Mama joined the Anita Bryant Crusade.

"So Mee-Maw was in on this?"

"Oh, no . . . ssss . . . I didn't tell a soul."

"Nice work, Mama."

"Don't you tease me. "

"I'm not," I said. "I mean it."

"Turn the TV . . . ssss . . . back on."

"No. I want to talk about the . . . power of attorney . . . thing."

She arranged her hands in front of her, one over the other, the way a cat does. "All right, then . . . ssss . . . talk."

"I'm just . . . I just want to make sure it's what you really want."

"You're hearin' it . . . ssss . . . from the horse's mouth."

"All right, then."

"I wanna go . . . ssss . . . when the Lord calls me. When he takes . . . ssss . . . my last breath. I don't wanna lie here like a lump on some infernal . . . ssss . . . machine with Lenore praying over me . . . ssss. . . you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And those puppets better not come around after I've passed."

Smiling, I took her hand in mind. "I'll do my best."

"You don't have to be here," she said. "I . . . ssss . . . didn't mean that."

"I want to, Mama . . . if I can."

She shook her head emphatically, withdrawing her hand. "This is between . . . ssss . . . me and the Lord, Mikey."

She wasn't trying to be brave; she meant it. The Lord was the only man who'd never let her down. He was not her angry, bullying husband or her unrepentant homosexual son or even her good son, the one who worked so hard to be a Christian but was hopelessly indentured to a woman Mama despised. As long ago as Blowing Rock the Lord could be counted upon to be exactly what Mama needed, when Mama needed it.

There was no point in wasting time with the others.

The signing process was surprisingly quick. Ben arrived in a taxi at noon and met the lawyer in the lobby. (Mama had chosen this guy from the Yellow Pages, reasoning that someone named Joel Bernstein wasn't likely to know anyone in Lenore and Irwin's crowd.) When Patreese arrived, resplendent in a crisp pink shirt and gray tie, the three of them joined me in Mama's room. We looked more like a caucus at an ACLU convention than the hastily assembled support group of a dying Christian lady.

Patreese pulled me and Ben into a huddle while the lawyer was conferring with Mama. "Y'all doin' all right?" he whispered.

"Pretty good," I said.

"I came in this morning," Patreese said. "She wanted to look pretty for y'all."

"Thanks," I said. "I noticed."

"I told her we bumped into each other."

Ben smirked. "One way of putting it."

Patreese rubbed my back with a big warm palm, while doing the same to Ben. For a moment we were a threesome again, and it was oddly reassuring.

I glanced toward the door. "What if we have visitors?"

Patreese frowned. "You mean the puppet lady?"

Ben stifled a giggle.

"Don't sweat it," said Patreese. "Mohammed's looking out for us."

I almost took this as a declaration of faith, considering Patreese's less-than-predictable profile, but stripper/hairdresser/Muslim seemed like one note too many.

Ben caught my confusion. "Mohammed's the guy at the desk," he said.

When we were done with the signing, Mama dismissed the lawyer, kissed me goodbye with brisk efficiency, and declared her need for a nap, thereby banishing the three of us to the Starbucks across the street. (Mr. Bernstein had to be in court.)

“Are y’all still headin’ home tomorrow?” Patreese asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, feeling the strangest mixture of relief and guilt. “I really gotta get back to work.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her for you.”

I told him that would be wonderful and wrote down our phone number and email address on a napkin. “Don’t get that mixed up,” I said, “with all the *other* ones you get.”

Patreese lowered his eyelids playfully. “Listen here,” he said. “I don’t mess around with just any ol’ coupla white boys.”

I thought that was a charming thing to say. “Hang on to your copy of the document,” I told him. “Just in case my sister-in-law gives you any shit.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” said Patreese. “I got the goods on *her*.”

This puzzled me. “What do you mean?”

“Just don’t you worry.”

Ben smiled impishly. “Did you strip for her or something?”

“Oh Lord, honey,” Patreese replied. “She wishes.”

That evening Lenore fixed dinner for us at the house. Sumter was there as well, still buzzing from a puppet show with his grandmother at a Christian academy in Pine Castle. It was a pleasant enough gathering, since we stayed off the hard stuff—by which I mean politics, religion, and sexuality—and my brother, touchingly, worked hard to support the illusion of a cozy family reunion. While Lenore was stacking the dishes and Sumter was watching *American Idol* with Ben, Irwin pulled me aside with a wink.

“Come sit in the boat with me.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nah . . . c’mon . . . it’s a nice night. The kids are watching TV.”

This was another cradle-robbing crack, but I let it go with a curdled smile.

“C’mon,” said Irwin, shoving me toward the latter-day ark parked in his driveway.

We mounted the trailer and sat side by side in the padded seats, staring out at a sprinkling of stars and the brutal halogen streetlight across the cul-de-sac. Irwin looked furtively from side to side, then toward the living room window, before taking a flask from under the seat and holding it out to me. “Not a goddamn word,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Glenfiddich.”

To me, drinking scotch is reminiscent of sucking on pennies, but Irwin had just risked hellfire two times over—drinking *and* cussing—in the name of brotherly bonding. The least I could do was recognize the gesture, so I took a swig from the flask and made an appreciative hissing noise. Irwin took a bigger swig, then put the flask away.

We sat for a while in silence while a dog barked sporadically in the distance.

“Too bad Papa’s not here,” said Irwin.

“Is it?”

“C’mon, bro.”

I tried to find a way to sound less harsh. Like a lot of straight guys, Irwin had concocted myths of his father’s greatness out of pure animal need and one too many viewings of *Field of Dreams*. “I think we experienced him differently,” I said.

“Remember when we were little, though? That summer he taught us to do sailor knots?”

“I remember how much he yelled when we got them wrong.”

“I know he could be an ornery old cuss.”

“Ornery?” I turned to face him. “Walter Brennan was ornery. Papa was flat-out mean. Papa was . . . Dick Fucking Cheney.”

Irwin gaped at me. “Who’s Walter Brennan?”

“You know . . . on *The Real McCoys* . . . Grandpappy Amos.” I sang some of the theme song for him. “ ‘From West Virginnny they came to stay, in sunny Cali-For-Nye-Ay.’ ”

“Oh, yeah. The old guy with the limp.”

“He was probably our age then,” I said darkly. “The age we are now.”

“Nah.” Irwin considered that for a moment. “You think?”

“A few years older maybe. Not much.”

“Jesus.”

The word hung there between us like a mist. Poor ol' Irwin was probably wondering if he'd blown his monthly allowance of blasphemies.

"I know it couldna been easy for you," he said at last. "With your lifestyle and all. Papa could be hard sometimes."

"He was hard on you, too." I remember well how the old man had screamed and yelled and threatened permanent disownment during Irwin's bad-boy days.

"Maybe a little," said my brother.

"He was even harder on Mama. She tried to leave him twice."

Irwin turned and blinked at me. "*When?*"

"The first time . . . when you and I were at Camp Hemlock. She holed up at the Baptist retreat. And she was on the verge of leaving him just before he died."

Irwin's mouth was hanging wide open. "How do you know this?"

I shrugged. "She told me herself. This morning."

"This is nuts."

Another shrug. To me it was the sanest thing Mama had ever done.

"No," said Irwin. "I mean, she woulda said something to Lenore. We were livin' across the road when Papa died. Mama and Lenore were really tight."

That's true, I thought. They were praying for Mama's queer son, who was dying of a biblical plague out there in sunny Cali-For-Nye-Ay.

"I'm just telling you what she said," I murmured.

"Anyway . . . why would she just up and leave him? He had cancer."

"Yeah . . . but he'd had the operation a while back . . . and everybody thought he was getting better. Even Papa said he was back in fighting form."

Irwin frowned. "But why would she . . . ? Do you think something *happened?*"

"A wasted lifetime, I'd say. Taking a rough guess."

Irwin was aghast. "I never heard word one about this."

He looked so rattled that I put my hand on his knee in a way-too-awkward gesture of comfort. "She's ready to go, Irwin. That tends to loosen people's tongues."

He nodded numbly. We just sat there for a while, listening to that barking dog and the distant joyful noise of Ben and Sumter, yelling out their

choices for American Idol. The kids were watching TV all right, and the grown-ups were facing the facts.

I took my hand off Irwin's knee. "I guess she just needed to tell us."

"She didn't tell *us*," Irwin said bitterly. "She told *you*."

I could understand how he might be hurt. He and Lenore had spent years caring for Mama, and she'd repaid them by saving her biggest secret for the absentee son from the West. For a moment I considered telling Irwin about Mama's fears of having to live on a respirator—and the obvious wedge that had driven between her and Lenore—but I knew that would open a whole new can of worms. It was best to just leave it alone.

"Mama's no dummy," I said. "I'm sure she knew that I'd tell you."

Practical Considerations

Back in San Francisco, we hit the ground running. Ben joined his boss and two other craftsmen at the Concourse Exhibition Center, where they were setting up for a big furniture show. Meanwhile, Jake and I were up in Pacific Heights at the French Consulate, replacing the dead portions of a boxwood hedge. This was my second job at the consulate, and I loved working there, gardening for the government that had seriously pissed off Bush by declining his war.

Consulates aren't my usual thing. I was referred to the job by someone I've known for years, a socialite named D'orothea (the apostrophe was added during her modeling days) who ran a stylish restaurant here in the late eighties. She and her wife, DeDe, knew someone on a committee at the consulate, so I was called in at the last minute to gussy the place up for a garden party. They must have liked us, because there we were again, leaning on our pickaxes in the foggy sunshine. A nice lady from the staff who looked a little like Leslie Caron (the current version) had just handed us a tray of leftover goodies.

"Mmm," said Jake, lifting an éclair. "Freedom pastries." He's a dry little dude, but every now and then he fires off a good one.

Chuckling, I reached for a *pain au chocolat*. "You should take some back to your beau."

Jake looked at me with a cheek full of pastry. "My *beau*?"

"Fuck off. I've been in the South."

"Orlando's not the South."

"A lot you know."

"And Connor's not my anything. We've only had a couple o' dates."

“Connor, eh?” The new . . . whatever . . . had surfaced while I was away, but this was the first time I’d heard his name. I knew only that Jake had met the guy at Lazy Bear, the big gay shindig up at the river. They had taken a walk in the redwoods and talked about global warming. The second date, presumably, had been back in the city.

“It’s no biggie,” said Jake. “It won’t go anywhere.”

“Why not? He’s gay, right?”

He nodded.

“Does he know the score about you?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“And he’s cool about it?”

Another nod. “Maybe a little *too*.”

“What do you mean?”

Jake turned over a bucket and sat on it, his hands dangling disconsolately between his knees. “Ever heard of Buck Angel?”

I thought for a moment. “A country singer, right?”

Jake shook his head. “A transman porn star. An FTM.”

It took a while to wrap my head around that. “Okay.”

“Connor’s totally hot for him.”

“Hot for him in real life? Or just hot for his movies?”

“His movies,” said Jake, sounding a little testy.

I just didn’t get it. If Jake, an FTM himself, had a thing for a guy who liked FTM porn stars, what the hell was the problem? It looked like smooth sailing to me.

“Help me out here,” I said.

Jake sighed and looked up from his dangling hands. “He’s real proud of his pussy, you know.”

“*Connor?*”

“No . . . doofus. Buck Angel.”

“Okay . . . thanks . . . keep going.”

“He calls himself ‘a real man with a real pussy.’ It’s part of his whole macho image. He flaunts it.”

The light began to dawn. I remembered the night Jake and I hooked up at the Lone Star and how utterly alienated he had seemed from the plumbing he was born with. “Don’t worry,” he’d said. “I’ll keep my pants on. I don’t like that thing any more than you do.” But Connor, apparently,

was attracted to Buck Angel, at least in part, *because* of his vagina and the immense pride he took in it. And there, as they say, was the rub.

“So Connor . . .” I began.

“ . . . wants to fuck me,” said Jake.

“Okay.”

“No . . . it’s not okay. I don’t wanna get fucked.” Jake gave me a bleak little smile. “At least not *there*.”

“Gotcha.”

“What should I do, boss?”

“Have another éclair,” I said.

I could hardly wait to get home that night to Google Buck Angel. I found a video clip that featured him in a witty scene at a laundromat. He was buff and tattooed, a completely convincing biker dude with a shaved head and a red mustache, and he was slowly feeding his clothes to a washing machine while a trio of beautiful women ogled him delightedly. When he was totally naked, he sat down to read a newspaper, so the women leaned closer to catch a glimpse of what lay beneath. It was a vagina all right.

I was cruising a gallery of still photos when Ben ambled into the office with a mug of tea and looked at the screen. “Is that him?” he asked, leaning forward.

“That’s him.”

“Fuck. Look at his pecs.”

“I know. And check out the ass. He’s got those little dents like you do.”

“Is there a frontal shot?”

“Oh, yeah.” I found it for him.

“Jesus.”

“Shaved and everything,” I said.

“You know what?” said Ben. “That’s fucking hot.”

I shot him a look.

“I’m serious.”

“I can see that.”

“It’s a little . . . unsettling, but . . . under the right circumstances . . .”

“I swear,” I muttered. “You young people today.”

I was joking, but not really. The world is changing way too fast for me with its Podcasts and pregnant strippers and macho manginas. No sooner

have I mastered one set of directions than another comes along to replace it. It's getting harder and harder to keep up with what's going down. My only solace lies in something Anna once told me:

"You don't have to keep up, dear. You just have to keep open."

I saw Anna two days later, when the weekend rolled around. I picked her up at the apartment and drove her to the SPCA on Sixteenth Street in search of the cat she wanted. The adoption center there is a well-designed modern facility that's considered a model for the rest of the country. It's what they call a "no kill" shelter, where animals are guaranteed a home until they're adopted. The dogs live on "Lassie Lane," each in his own sunny private apartment. They have couches, potted plants, and TVs playing cat videos. The cats have a separate "condo" facility, complete with aquariums and picture windows, so they can stare at the birds outside. I went there once between marriages, five or six years ago, thinking that a pet might make a decent stand-in for a husband. As I wandered the halls, peering through doors at recumbent wretches with longing in their eyes, I might have been back at the Ritch Street Baths, where love (or at least a warm body) was potentially waiting around the corner.

You just had to keep looking.

"Where do these kitties come from?" Anna was standing in one of the cat condos, stroking a handsome longhaired domestic on a perch.

"From Animal Control, I think. They find the ones that are adoptable."

"What about the unadoptable?"

I shrugged. "I guess they don't make it here."

"Where is Animal Control?" she asked.

It was barely a block away, so we were there in a matter of minutes. This was a city-run operation, the front line of animal rescue, and the difference was palpable. The rooms were more like cells than condos, and some of the animals were howling in panic and confusion. "This is more like it," said Anna, surveying the scene.

She found a small black cat she liked: a timid war-torn creature with a notch in its ear. A sturdy lesbian staffer let us into the room, where Anna sat in a folding chair and waited for the cat to approach her. It took a while, but it happened. The cat rubbed against Anna's leg, emitting a feeble throaty

noise that was closer to “ack” than “meow.” Satisfied, it sprang into her velvet lap and curled up to the size of a dinner plate.

“She fits,” said Anna, smiling at the staffer.

“We call her Squeaker,” the staffer said. “For obvious reasons.”

Anna nodded.

“You could name her what you want, of course.”

Anna rubbed the cat’s chin with her forefinger.

“She’s older than the others,” the staffer added. “Will that be a problem?”

“It hasn’t been for me,” said Anna.

She looked up at me warmly. “Let’s take her home.”

By the time we’d arrived at Anna’s apartment, heavily laden with pet paraphernalia, she had already named the cat Ninotchka. She’d first seen the film as a gender-confused nineteen-year-old and since then had nursed a serious thing for Garbo. “We can call her Notch for short,” she said, “after her most distinctive feature.”

We didn’t call her *anything* for a while, since she crawled under Anna’s ancestral oak armoire and refused to come out. All that remained of her was a tiny disembodied voice going “ack” from time to time, like a cricket stranded in the woodwork.

“She’s just getting her bearings,” Anna said blithely as she poured me a glass of sherry at the kitchen table. Her hand, I noticed, was shaking a little.

“Can I help with that?” I asked.

“What’s the matter? Afraid I’ll spill on you?”

I smiled at her as she poured her own drink.

“A toast to Ninotchka,” she said, lifting her glass.

I clinked my glass against hers. “Wherever she may be.”

“And listen to me, dear: If I die before she does, she’s not to go back to the shelter.”

I admit I was rattled by that. “Well,” I said, “aren’t we melodramatic this afternoon?”

“It’s a practical consideration, dear. Don’t be silly. You just never know.”

No, you don’t, do you? I was thinking of dear, departed Harry, the poodle I thought would surely survive me. Or other positive guys who maxed out their credit cards, counting on death to cut them a deal, but

ending up broke and alive. Not to mention the virus-free friends who've recently dropped dead of heart attacks. The end can come—or not come—to anyone at anytime, and no one knew that better than Anna. Her mother had died at ninety-something, still running a brothel in Nevada; her daughter hadn't made it far past fifty. Assumptions of *any* kind are a luxury we can't afford.

"All right," I said. "If that happens . . . we'll take her."

She patted my hand in gratitude.

"You're welcome," I said. "I'm sure we've got *something* she can live under."

Anna glanced toward the armoire. "Careful, dear. She can hear you."

Around twilight Jake showed up, letting himself into Anna's flat with the key she had given him. He'd brought her a bag of persimmons from the Farmers Market and a ridiculously large block of toilet paper from CostCo. He stayed for a few minutes in hopes of meeting Ninotchka, but the cat, not unlike Garbo herself, wanted to be alone.

When Jake headed back to his own flat, Anna turned to me with a gleam in her eye that I'd come to recognize over the years. "He's seeing someone, you know."

"I know," I said evenly.

"What's the matter?" she asked, reading my expression.

I explained—perhaps a little too delicately, considering the audience—that Jake was not as comfortable with his "birth genitals" as his boyfriend wanted him to be.

"I thought his boyfriend was gay," said Anna.

"He is. And he relates to Jake as a guy. He just likes the idea of . . ."

"A vagina," said Anna. "You can say it, dear."

Anna had become too much of a parent for me to discuss this issue with any degree of nonchalance. "Jake says he can't relate to his vagina, that it's basically . . . a foreign object to him. To use it having sex with his boyfriend would be like . . . denying his essential masculinity. If you follow me." I smiled at her helplessly. "Are you following me?"

"I think so, yes."

"Was it like that for you?"

"Like what, dear?"

“Did you feel that way about your penis?”

“Well,” said Anna, widening her eyes above the rim of her sherry glass, “let’s just say I wasn’t especially attached to it.”

I smiled, relieved that she’d lightened the moment.

“You know, dear, some kids today are perfectly content to do without the surgery. They figure that gender is mostly in the head anyway, so why tamper with the parts that are specifically designed for pleasure? Why not let your head have the last word and leave your groin to enjoy itself? That way . . . if you were born female, say, like Jake . . . you don’t end up with . . . you know . . . some unfortunate, unfeeling—”

“Frankenpecker.”

Anna blinked at me in mild horror.

“That’s Jake’s term, not mine.”

“The point is, dear . . . to me it wasn’t about sex or pleasure or any of those lovely things. It was about identity. And completion. I couldn’t feel complete with what I’d been given. It just wasn’t possible. I imagine Jake feels the same way.”

“But Jake doesn’t *want* the surgery,” I pointed out. “He wants to ignore that part of himself completely. Doesn’t that seem like a waste to you?”

She shrugged. “We’re not Jake, are we?”

I took a sip of my sherry and stared out at the growing gloom, the darkening green of the sycamore trees. We were so quiet for a while that I could hear Anna’s mantel clock ticking in the other room, and, outside, the sound of children laughing in the street. There were more of them than ever in the Castro these days; the landscape was forever reshaping itself.

“So,” said Anna, suddenly chipper. “When did gay men start liking vaginas?”

The Cave

My buddy Brian at the nursery has such a passion for Native Americana that he's made a ritual of searching for a local landmark called Ishi's Cave. He takes the N Judah streetcar to Cole Valley, stocks up on trail mix at Whole Foods, and climbs the winding streets above the medical center until he comes to the edge of a forest. Strictly speaking, it's not really a forest, just a big grove of eucalyptus trees planted by schoolchildren one Arbor Day in the late nineteenth century. But somewhere on the slopes of this city canyon lies a cave—no bigger than an igloo—that once sheltered the last Stone Age man in America.

Or so Brian believes.

I have my doubts about this, having joined Brian on one of his many futile expeditions. I think the cave is largely his excuse for telling Ishi's story, which is all the more haunting because it's a matter of historical record. Ishi, as you may know, was the last of his tribe. He lost his entire family to bounty hunters, then stumbled out of his remote California valley, sick with loneliness and grief, throwing himself on the mercy of the white man. This was 1911. There were trains and telephones and automobiles in Ishi's scary new world. He was taken to San Francisco, where a kindly professor made him an exhibit at the anthropology museum. There he became a global celebrity; hoards of sightseers swarmed to the museum every Sunday to watch "the wild man" carve arrowheads and string bows. Ishi, obligingly, would sweep the floor afterward, and generally tidy up the place, then sleep in a small storeroom on the premises, not far from the reassembled bones of his ancestors. When the crowds got too much for him, he took to climbing the hill above the museum and sitting alone in a cave—*that* cave—as if to connect with the world he had lost forever.

The part about the cave is more local legend than established fact—a little too New Age-y romantic to be trusted. But it's comforting to think that Ishi *might* have found such a refuge, however briefly. He died of tuberculosis five years after entering the modern world. The professor had promised his friend not to perform an autopsy (that procedure being contrary to native beliefs), but the professor was in Europe when Ishi died and had apparently neglected to leave instructions. Ishi's brain was removed and shipped away for research. Its whereabouts remained a mystery until the end of the century when it was found floating in formaldehyde at a Smithsonian Institution warehouse in Maryland. After Indian activists lobbied fiercely for the brain's return, it was finally laid to rest in the foothills of Mount Lassen, the homeland of Ishi's people.

The burial spot, understandably, remains a secret.

"Okay," said Brian, apropos of nothing, "this time I got it nailed."

We were at the nursery—a week after I got home from Florida—and he was helping me load an especially weighty laburnum into my truck.

"Are we speaking of a lady?" I asked.

"Nah, man. Ishi's cave."

"That was my second guess."

Brian gave the laburnum a final shove, then collapsed on the tailgate, gasping from the effort. "Seriously. I met this old hippie who says he stayed there overnight at the Winter Solstice."

"No shit?" I sat next to him, brushing the burlap dirt off my hands. "Did he say what he was on?"

"Okay, fuck it. I'll go on my own."

"You're going back *again*?"

"I'm telling you, Michael, I know where it is now. I've been looking too low down. It's up near the rim of the canyon. Not that far from the road."

"Where did you meet this guy?"

"He was blogging about it."

Blogging about Ishi.

"He wouldn't get specific with me," Brian added, "but he mentioned enough landmarks that I got a pretty good idea where it is."

There was this goofball quixotic gleam in my old friend's eye that I've always found hard to resist. And given how little time I'd spent with him

since meeting Ben, I couldn't see the harm in tromping through that damned forest one more time.

I asked him when he wanted to do it.

"I dunno. Sometime in the next week or so. I wanna show it to Shawna." He smiled sheepishly, rubbing his palm on the back of his neck, like an old lion with a pebble stuck in his paw. "I want her to see her old man's not a total flake."

Shawna had grown up on the Ishi story, but, like me, had grown jaundiced about that cave. I knew she'd be kind, whatever the outcome, but it made me nervous that Brian was banking so much on this Tom Sawyer fantasy of Injun Joe's Cave.

"Maybe we should find it first," I suggested.

He seemed to catch my drift and didn't take issue with it. "What's a good day for you?" he asked.

"How about Thursday. I've got a client in Parnassus Heights. It's easy to get to the woods from there."

"Cool," said Brian, hopping off the tailgate.

When I was behind the wheel with the engine running, he leaned down for a final word. "Shawna's moving to New York, by the way."

Brian's daughter, as you know, had already shared that information with me, but I thought it better to play dumb. "No kidding?"

"Déjà vu, eh?"

He meant his ex-wife, the one who'd left him—left both of us, really—all those years ago.

"It's not the same thing," I told him.

"No," he said quietly, "you're right." He whacked the side of the truck as if sending a horse on its way. "Give my love to the hubby."

Two days later, when Brian met me at my client's house, he was decked out in cords and a multipocketed canvas jacket that gave him a semi-safari look. He'd brought with him a couple of rustic walking sticks, still golden with shellac, that he and Shawna had bought years earlier in a souvenir shop outside of Yosemite. Seeing me hunkered there in the rose bed, he held the sticks aloft and shook them like spears.

"Cave ho!" he hollered.

And I said, "Who you callin' a ho?"

He laughed and turned to my assistant. "How's it goin', Jake?"

"No complaints," said Jake.

"Awriiight," said Brian.

(I can't help but notice that Brian acts a little bit butcher with Jake than he does with me. Outnumbered by women and queers in the family circle, he seems to welcome the chance to engage, unapologetically, in a little masculine folderol.)

I grabbed my knapsack and turned to Jake. "I'll be back in an hour or two. Take your lunch break whenever you want."

"No sweat, boss."

The edge of the forest was four houses away, so we were there almost instantly, peering down into the gloom of the chasm. A week of hot weather had finally summoned the fog from the ocean, turning the ivy-hung eucalypts into a blurry old black-and-white movie. Amazing as it may seem, we weren't far from the geographical center of the city.

I have to admit, those walking sticks proved useful. I'd forgotten how steep the slope was at this entrance of the forest. There was a crude trail, but it was narrow and crumbly, weaving through a nasty barbed-wire tangle of blackberries. Here and there, amid the thorns, late-blooming calla lilies poked toward the sky, but since I was playing Lewis to Brian's Clark, I resisted the urge to do my Katharine Hepburn impersonation.

"It's hard to believe this used to be a sand dune," I said.

"It did?" said Brian.

"All the way to the ocean. Old Man Sutro bought up this half of town with the money he made in the Comstock Lode. He wanted to call this Mount Sutro, but that didn't work too good for a sand dune, so . . . he brought the trees in."

"Well, you're a font of information."

I shrugged. "I'm a Southerner. I like that sorta shit."

It's interesting how I don't mind owning my heritage when I'm in San Francisco; it's only in Florida that it completely sticks in my craw.

"So here's what I'm wondering," I added.

"Yeah?"

"How do you have a cave in a sand dune?"

"O ye of little faith," said Brian.

"Really, though."

“I think it’s more like a rock ledge with . . . you know . . . a space under it.”

“What did the wise old hippie tell you?”

Brian ignored this gentle poke and kept trudging ahead. The path began to wind upwards again until we reached a paved road running along the edge of the canyon. We took the road up the hill for a while, then Brian stopped in his tracks and peered down into the abyss with the nervous, beady-eyed gaze of a terrier spotting a rabbit.

“That’s it,” he said.

“What’s it?”

“See that ledge down there? I think it’s beneath that.”

“And how are we supposed to get there?” It wasn’t a sheer drop-off, but the slope was steep and unstable-looking and riddled with briars.

“You don’t have to go,” Brian said. “I’ll scout it out first.”

“Sure thing, *kemo sabe*.”

So I watched from the road as Brian made his wobbly way down the slope toward his own private Holy Grail. Each time his stick struck the ground, it set off a little avalanche of pebbles and dirt. “Be careful,” I said nervously. “It looks shaky.”

No sooner had I spoken than Brian hit a patch of loose ground and landed on his ass, lugging his way downhill into a thicket so dense that I lost sight of him completely. It sounds comical—it was, in fact, for a little while—but something told me not to laugh.

“Brian?”

There was no reply—and no sign of movement in the undergrowth.

I scooted down the slope with a growing sense of dread. “Jesus, Brian.”

Nothing.

I swatted at the briars with my walking stick until I could see him. He was still on his back, his face crisscrossed with fine red lines. He was not moving at all.

“Oh, fuck, Brian . . . oh no, Jesus . . .”

“Get a grip,” he said.

I made a peculiar sound that was somewhere between laughter and groaning, then crawled through the hole I’d made with my stick. “Are you all right?”

“Do I look all right?”

“I mean . . . can you move?”

“I think I hit a rock with my foot. It feels like I’ve been hobbled.”

That term meant only one thing to me—Kathy Bates in *Misery*, looming over James Caan with her sledgehammer—so I glanced down at Brian’s sneakered feet with considerable trepidation. Neither one, however, seemed to be lying at an unusual angle.

“It’s the right one,” said Brian.

I squeezed through the briars on my hands and knees to get a closer look. His ankle did seem to be swelling. I tugged his socks down gently.

“Ow! Fuck! Ow!”

“Sorry.” It was all too clear that even with my assistance Brian would never make it up to the road, so I took off my backpack and started digging through it.

Brian wrinkled his brow at me. “Don’t tell me you brought a first-aid kit.”

“Even better,” I said, holding up my cell phone.

I was about to dial 911 when I remembered that the medical center was only a few hundred yards through the woods, so I called Jake instead and explained the situation, giving him our exact location. I knew he would welcome this manly challenge, and he sprang to action like a commando. “Stay cool,” he said. “I got it covered, boss.”

“He’s running to the emergency room,” I explained to Brian afterward.

He was up on his elbows now, already looking embarrassed. “That’s not necessary. I’m perfectly—”

“Lie the fuck down,” I said. “Stop being such a guy.”

Brian obeyed with a grunt. The deep scratches on his face had started to run, forming a road map across his features. I fumbled in my backpack again.

“What’s that?” he asked as I started to dab at the blood.

“A Wash ’n Dri.”

“Jesus, you’re a fag.”

“I brought it for lunch. Do you want an Orangina?”

“I can’t drink it lying down.”

“Sit up, then. But do it slowly.”

He sat up and took the bottle from me. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. How bad does it hurt?”

“Bad.”

“Do you want a turkey sandwich?”

He shrugged. “What the hell.”

We both munched on sandwiches in silence while we waited to be rescued.

Finally, Brian said, “The cave should be right over there.”

“Fuck the cave,” I told him.

Close Enough

So there we were, curtained off from the world, waiting for a doctor. Brian was flat on a gurney, growing maudlin on painkillers; I sat next to him in a white plastic chair, hypnotized by the low hum of fluorescent lights. Our wilderness epic had somehow evolved into a minimalist play, a couple of actors working without props or scenery.

“Look at it this way,” I said. “We may not have found the cave, but we’re right next door to where the museum used to be.”

“What museum?”

“Of anthropology . . . where Ishi lived.”

He winced at this reminder of his disgrace and ran his fingers through his hair. The scratches on his face were turning dark and crusty. “You’re right,” he muttered, his eyes fixed grimly on the ceiling. “He must have swept the floors on this very block.”

I ignored his sarcastic tone. “Which means . . . we’re sort of following his footsteps . . . in a way.”

Brian grunted. “We never even got to the cave, man.”

“Well, how great a cave can it be if it’s the size of an igloo? It’s not like there was gonna be hieroglyphics. It’s probably full of snails and old condoms.”

I thought he’d be pissed at me for befouling his shrine, but he just smiled dimly at a private joke. “Doorknobs, actually.”

“*Doorknobs?*”

“Ishi’s two favorite things about . . . you know . . . so-called civilization were matches and doorknobs. So this guy . . . the old hippie . . . brought him a doorknob.”

“And did what with it?”

“Just left it in the cave.”

“Well, that’s kinda creepy.”

“Why?”

“I dunno . . . it’s so . . . me big white man, me bring you firewater and doorknob.”

“It’s a metaphor, dipshit. Or maybe a spiritual statement.” Brian rolled on his side and gazed at me in doleful resignation. “Or something.”

“You can find it later,” I said. “Don’t beat yourself up.”

He shook his head. “It was gonna be Shawna’s going-away surprise.”

“Yeah, well . . . now she’ll have a crutch to sign.”

His eyes widened. “*Crutch?*”

“Cast . . . whatever.”

“It was her favorite story,” he said. “I wanted to give her an ending.”

The tears welling in his eyes caught me off guard. Brian may be the last of the sensitive liberals, but weeping doesn’t come easily to him—at least not lately. I figured it was mostly the drugs. I stood up and laid my hand gingerly on his messy white mop. “She doesn’t need an ending, sport. She’s just moving to New York.”

“It’s not that,” he murmured.

“Then what?”

“Just . . . stupid shit.”

“Brian . . . I need more.”

“Then take your hand off my head.”

I should have known better. I have a way of infantilizing Brian whenever he’s hurting, and he’s never been really comfortable with the comforting. I removed my hand and sat down again, angling the chair so I could see his face. “That better?”

He said nothing for a moment and then: “Do you think I’ve wasted my life?”

“Brian . . . c’mon . . .”

“I mean it, man. I’m almost sixty-fucking-two. I’ve got nothing to show for it but that lame-ass fucking nursery . . . and that was yours to begin with.”

“What about Shawna?”

“What about her? She’s a great kid, but . . .”

“But what?”

“Am I a loser for not marrying again?”

I took the shrink’s way out. “Is that how you feel?”

“I didn’t used to. I didn’t even think about it. Shawna was all I needed. The two of us were pretty much . . . home.”

“I think that’s your answer, then.”

“Is it?”

“Besides, you can always get married, if that’s what you want. You’re still plenty hot enough.” I smiled at him. “Just ask my husband.”

Brian returned the smile. “Your husband is a twisted little fuck.”

“Thank the Lord,” I said.

He laughed. “I’m happy for you, man. You deserve it.”

“Well, so do you, buttwipe. Get your ass online. The ladies’ll be lining up. Whatever happened to that sculptress you met at Burning Man?”

“She was too much of a purple person.”

Purple people, in our private lexicon, are old gray lefties of either gender with a fondness for purple clothing, squash-blossom necklaces, and the like. Brian and I are both purplish, philosophically speaking, but we’re put off by the predictability of the uniform. To me it’s no more radical or original than, say, Arizona retirees in their pastel pantsuits.

Brian seemed lost in thought, and then: “Heard from Mary Ann lately?”

“Nope.”

“You talk to her, though.”

It was more of a statement than a question, so I set him straight. “No, I don’t, Brian. Not for a long time.” I’d been caught between the two of them when Mary Ann left him eighteen years earlier, and I had no intention of letting that happen again.

“Sorry,” he said meekly. “I thought you did.”

“Not since 9/11,” I said. “That’s been . . . Jesus . . . four years.”

Brian whistled, sharing my amazement. “Time flies when you’re waging a War on Terror.”

On the day that defined the new millennium, Mary Ann had called Mrs. Madrigal from her house in Darien, Connecticut. She wanted to make sure that “everybody” was still there, that no one from the old crowd at Barbary Lane had chosen that week to travel to Manhattan. From Anna’s description, the call had been short and businesslike, more of a schoolyard

headcount than a serious effort at reestablishing contact. It was touching to know that Mary Ann had worried about us, but the whole country was worrying that day, so I didn't read much into it. Still, I gave her a call, wondering if she might have lost someone herself, but our talk was limited to the surreal events we'd just watched on television. A crisis *does* draw people together, but rarely for the right reason. The old wounds flare up again soon enough; the bond lasts no longer than the terror.

But every now and then I can't resist the urge to Google Mary Ann. On a recent search I found her name on a press release for a charitable event in Darien—a food fair for the local Explorer Scout troop that, strange as it seems, runs the ambulance service in that wealthy Republican enclave on Long Island Sound. Mary Ann was expressing her pride in her stepson Robbie, a member of the troop, and pledging her support, somewhat inelegantly, to this “very unique institution.” She was pictured with Robbie and her husband of several years, a tall, skinny bald guy in a patchwork madras blazer who had recently retired as CEO of a New York brokerage firm. Mary Ann was identified as a “former television personality.” It made me think of one of those “As Seen on TV” labels you find on drugstore packaging for vegetable dicers and anti-snoring contraptions.

Mary Ann's neighbors in Darien must have had to do some Googling themselves to determine the exact nature of her fame. A few folks may have remembered her short-lived cable talk show in the early nineties—a pleasant enough diversion involving minor celebrities and their pets—but she was far more likely to be known as the gracious spokesperson for a line of adjustable beds for the elderly. I remember the first time I saw the commercial. Thack had left me several weeks earlier, and I was holed up in bed with late-night TV and a pint of Cherry Garcia, having just whacked off, with scant satisfaction, to a porn video in which all the Texas Rangers had Czechoslovakian accents.

“*Are you like I used to be?*” Mary Ann was saying, still amazingly pretty in her mid-forties. “Do you wake up feeling more tired than when you went to bed?”

I guffawed and dropped ice cream on the sheets and thought: *Yes, I am, babycakes. I'm exactly like you used to be.* It was a strange little moment of communion, as if she were somehow speaking directly to me. I briefly considered tracking her down and having a rueful hoot about the random

fucked-upness of life, until I remembered I was helping to raise the daughter she had left behind. Shawna was a teenager by then—and something of a handful—not to mention the fact that I was closer than ever to the guy whose heart Mary Ann had broken. There had been way too much chilly water under the bridge; it was foolish, even dangerous, to pretend otherwise.

So after the brief emotional ceasefire of a terrorist attack, our separate lives—and the silence—continued as if the towers had never fallen. The urge to reconnect didn't arise again until Ben and I were married at City Hall. Maybe my guard was down because my heart was so open, but I wanted to share the good news with Mary Ann. I wanted a fifty-something housewife in Connecticut to be happy for me, her old friend Mouse: the guy who once believed—as she surely had—that he'd never live to see forty.

But I resisted the impulse. I wasn't even sure if I knew her anymore.

"Where the fuck is the doctor?" asked Brian, growing restless on the gurney. "I could be dead by now."

"Relax," I said. "Enjoy your drugs."

He grunted and stared at the wall.

"Do you think she'll look her up?"

"Who?"

"Shawna. When she gets to New York."

I told him that Darien was a far cry from New York.

"That's not the point."

"She doesn't talk about Mary Ann at all. It's not something that concerns her. She's always been more curious about Connie."

"Yeah," he said numbly. "I guess you're right."

Connie Bradshaw, Shawna's birth mother, was a not-that-close friend of Mary Ann during high school days in Ohio. Connie had become a stewardess for United (back when there were still stewardesses) and was Mary Ann's only contact in San Francisco when she defected from Cleveland. She crashed on Connie's sofa bed in the Marina just long enough to get her bearings, and more than long enough to realize that her once envied classmate (a head majorette no less) was not quite as sophisticated as she'd remembered. Connie was a daffy, good-natured

sleep-around. (Later, in fact, she would share an awkward one-night stand with Brian, before he finally hooked up with Mary Ann.) Mary Ann wanted no part of Connie's free-range tackiness—not the Pet Rock or the plush python or the Aqua Velva she kept in the bathroom cabinet for the guys who slept over. She fled within the week, as impulsively as she had fled Cleveland.

San Francisco, however, is basically a village, so Mary Ann never quite escaped Connie's worshipful attention, especially as Mary Ann's star began to rise. In a weak moment, during a chance meeting at the zoo, Mary Ann told Connie (then pregnant with Shawna by an undetermined father) that Brian wanted a baby but was shooting blanks. Connie never forgot this. Months later, as she lay dying on the delivery table, her blood having failed to clot, she bequeathed her newborn daughter to her famous classmate from Cleveland and a guy she'd mostly remembered as having once been sweet to her.

When Connie's brother delivered Shawna (literally) to the startled couple at 28 Barbary Lane he brought them a trunk of Connie's treasures—her legacy as it were—a sad collection of dried corsages and pep buttons and yearbooks scrawled with smiley faces. Mary Ann waited until Shawna was five to open the trunk, an event that Shawna remembers as both tender and curiously momentous. Not a bad call, given the fact that Mary Ann left for New York only days later. I've often wondered if Mary Ann saw that little ritual as a moment of divestiture, a changing of the guard. *Here's your real mom, darling. She's the one who deserves your love. She's the one that you'll be missing.*

As it happened, Shawna took Mary Ann's departure rather well and began a serious fascination with Connie. Flight Attendant Barbie became the centerpiece of Shawna's toy collection and was often drafted for theatrical extravaganzas requiring a mother figure. Before long I found myself being interrogated about a woman I'd met only once—when Brian brought her to one of Anna's Christmas parties. I'd end up telling Shawna how pretty Connie was, and how nice, and how much genuine cheer she brought into a room. But the kid was no dummy and demanded more as she grew older. She was about twelve when she grilled me one afternoon on Heart's Desire Beach, a tree-lined cove on Tomales Bay, where we'd settled

with a picnic lunch. She waited until Brian was dog-paddling offshore before asking me if I'd ever met her "real dad."

I told her—coward that I am—that I'd always thought of Brian as her real dad.

"The other one," she said. "The one that got my real mom pregnant."

What was I supposed to say? "Well, no, honey . . . I never did."

Shawna dug in the sand with her toes, idly making a trench. "Do you know where she met him?"

All I could remember from Mary Ann's account was that Connie had narrowed Shawna's paternity down to two "really nice guys." Only one had come with an actual location, so that's the one I went with. "I think it was the Us Festival."

"The what?"

"It was sort of like Woodstock, I guess, but a lot more calculated and commercial." (A few weeks earlier we had watched the Woodstock documentary on Brian's VCR, so it made for an easy reference point.)

"Was everybody naked?"

I smiled, shaking my head. "This was the eighties. Things had changed by then. Your mom was probably wearing something shiny."

"Did she see him after that?"

"I'm not really sure." I smoothed a patch of sand with my palm, hoping we'd get the hell off this subject. "I just know where she met him."

There was a long uncomfortable silence, so we both gazed out at the water. While Brian splashed in the distance like a drunken seal, the waning sun was copper-plating the surface of the bay. It was easy to forget that this sleepy inlet marked the exact location of the San Andreas Fault. Many eons earlier (as Anna had once explained to me) the earth had ripped open here, leaving only this shimmering, seductive scar.

Shawna turned to me: "So . . . was my real mom a ho or what?"

My jaw must have hit the sand. "Jesus, Shawna, what sort of question is that?"

She shrugged her delicate nut-brown shoulders. "Just a regular one."

I felt like one of those big-bosomed matrons in *The Three Stooges* movies who were always huffing "Well, I never!" so I softened my tone to keep from losing the girl completely. "Let's put it this way," I told her. "If

she was a ho, then I was one, too. And so was your dad, for that matter. Back in those days we were all a bit . . .”

“Ho-ish,” she said, filling in the silence.

I flicked sand at her blue-jeaned legs. “You just watch it.”

“No, you do!” she said, flicking back and giggling. She could still be a little girl sometimes, and it never failed to melt my heart.

The conversation ended when Brian came in from his swim, swaddling himself in an ancient Grateful Dead beach towel. Shawna offered him a sandwich from the picnic basket, then leaned against him as he ate it, commenting on the gulls that were wheeling above the bay. I envied them both at that moment, but mostly Shawna, for having a father with such a boundless capacity for love. *What must that feel like?* I wondered.

There were footsteps in the hospital corridor, so I wrapped up as succinctly as possible.

“Don’t worry about Shawna,” I said. “She’s yours for life.”

“You think so, huh?”

“I know so, Mr. Man.”

“Okay, fine, but what if—”

The curtains parted with a sudden swoosh to reveal a young male doctor of South Asian descent. He looked a lot like M. Night Shyamalan, I thought. “Okay,” he said as he consulted his clipboard. “What have we here?”

I turned to Brian. “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

Brian chuckled.

The doctor frowned in confusion. “I’m sorry, I—”

“You must be straight,” I said, grinning.

The doctor smiled sweetly. “Is that relevant?”

“No, I was just . . . never mind . . . I’m sorry.”

The doctor studied Brian’s foot for a moment, then asked him how it happened. “He fell into an abyss,” I explained.

“Is this your partner?” the doctor asked Brian.

Brian glanced at me and smirked. “Close enough,” he said.

The Burning Question

It was almost dark and Ben and I were crammed into our galley kitchen, trying out a new recipe for brussels sprouts that a checkout guy at Trader Joe's had shared with me. Neither one of us is a serious foodie—by anyone's measure—so we tend to approach cooking with the peppy unprofessionalism of fifth-graders assigned a science project.

"I'll fry the pancetta," said Ben, squeezing past me to the stove in a minuet we'd already perfected. "Do you know how to blanch?"

That's a wonderful setup line for a queer of my generation, but I squelched my inner Baby Jane for fear of wearing out her welcome. "It's the same as steaming, right?"

"Yeah . . . I think so."

I grabbed a saucepan and began to fill it under the tap. "This is gonna be so fucking good."

"I dunno," said Ben, snipping the pancetta with the kitchen shears. "I'm not sure about the maple syrup."

"Why not?"

"*With brussels sprouts?*"

I've never been a fan of vegetables. To my way of thinking, there are very few of them that would not be hugely improved by the addition of bacon and syrup. Ben, on the other hand, likes his greens unadulterated. He munches them raw like a giraffe.

"Don't you think," he said judiciously, "that the syrup might overwhelm the sprouts?"

"I certainly hope so."

He grinned at me sideways, benignly disapproving, as he dropped the pancetta into a hot skillet. "How long do we bake it then?"

“Ten or fifteen minutes, at least. Long enough for ’em to get all tender and syrupy.” I waggled my eyebrows in lascivious appreciation.

That was when my cell phone rang. *Rang off the hook*, as they used to say, back when telephones sounded like my cell phone—noisy and demanding.

I checked the readout and saw my brother’s name.

“It’s Irwin,” I said, looking up at Ben. It was a sobering moment, to say the least, since we both knew that Irwin never calls just to chat.

“Pick up,” he said. “I can handle this.”

I headed for the living room and settled on the sofa, giving a final holler to Ben in the kitchen—“A full half-cup of syrup, please, sir”—before opening the phone and greeting my brother as nonchalantly as possible. “How’s it goin’, Irwin?”

That seemed to be a tough question.

“Is it Mama?”

“Oh . . . no, she’s fine. I mean, not fine but . . . you know . . .”

“Sure.” I was growing more and more uncomfortable. I was pretty sure I was about to catch holy hell for the change in the power of attorney.

But Irwin sounded oddly subdued. “Listen, Mikey. I’m headin’ out your way in a few days. I thought we could have lunch or something.”

“Sure,” I said, now completely confused. “What’s up?”

“Oh . . . you know . . . just a conference in San Jose.”

“What sort of conference?”

“Uh . . . Promise Keepers.”

That’s the big Christian men’s powwow. They gather in stadiums and bond over Jesus and promise to love their families and “lead” their wives. Lenore has not been led anywhere for years, but guys like my brother are so starved for male-to-male intimacy that they have to grab it wherever they find it. I could hardly give him shit about it.

“Why don’t you come for dinner?” I said. “We’ve got a great new recipe for brussels sprouts.”

Ben hooted from the kitchen.

“You know,” said Irwin, “I mean no disrespect to Ben, but . . . this is more . . . brother to brother.”

What the fuck was he getting at?

“Okay,” I said evenly. “We can get a bite somewhere. The two of us.”

“Could you come to the hotel?”

“In San Jose?”

“I’ll be out at the airport, actually.”

“Jesus, Irwin, that’s bleak. At least come into town.”

There was silence, so I figured I’d upset him with the J-word. “Sorry. I just meant there’s better places to eat if—”

“I don’t care about the food, Mikey! I just want to get together!”

“Okay. Fine. Whatever.” I was surprised by the anguish in his voice.

“Can you tell me what this is about?”

“No . . . not on the phone.”

“Will Lenore be with you?”

“No.”

“Well . . . call me when you get in.”

“I will, bro.” His tone was softer now. “Thanks for this, you hear?”

Thanks for *what* was the burning question.

I have a gardener friend up in Sebastopol who likes to tell people that he has a mind like a steel trap—sometimes he has to gnaw his leg off to get away from it.

That’s me to a T. Once I start fretting about something, there’s no escaping its viselike grip. It pops up on the treadmill at the gym. Or during sex. Or in the middle of a pleasant dinner at home when you should be concentrating on the food.

“They’re actually pretty good,” said Ben.

I drew a blank. “Uh . . . sorry . . . what?”

“The brussels sprouts.”

“Oh . . . yeah . . . it works, doesn’t it?”

Ben set his fork down and regarded me with a gentle, knowing smile. “I wouldn’t worry about it, babe. Maybe he just wants some time with you.”

“He’s never wanted time with me.”

“What about when you were molesting alligators?”

“That was the last time, believe me. He just needed an accomplice.”

Ben took a sip of his wine. “Maybe he wants to come out of the closet.”

I rolled my eyes at this deliberate mischief. “How did I know you would say that?”

A wicked chuckle.

“Trust me,” I told him. “That ain’t it. And if it were, he wouldn’t be doing it during a Promise Keepers convention.”

“I know.”

I smirked at him. “You and your Suit Daddies.”

“You think he had a fight with Lenore?”

I shrugged. “It’s possible.”

“Maybe he just got sick of the puppets.”

I smiled.

“Or he wants your advice about the gay grandson.”

“Right. Like *that* would happen.”

“So . . . it has to be about the power of attorney.”

“But why wouldn’t he say that on the phone?”

Ben shrugged. “Beats me.”

“He obviously wants privacy. He’s traveling without Lenore and he didn’t even want *you* there.”

“Maybe he’s having an affair.”

I considered that for a moment. “And wants to tell his gay brother?”

“Why not? People usually wanna tell *somebody* . . . and he knows you won’t haul out the hellfire and brimstone.”

“I might.”

“No you won’t. You’re kind. That’s why I’m with you, baby . . . and that’s why he wants to talk to you, whatever it is.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

After dinner we headed for the hot tub. We did our usual thing: taking turns carrying each other, allowing the other to be weightless, like Superman in flight with Lois Lane. (You can do that in a redwood tub, unlike those shallow fiberglass spas that won’t let you float.) It was my turn to be Superman, so Ben’s head was tucked under my chin as I padded around the tub, setting our course in the darkness. A gauzy fog had stalled on the hillside, making the amber porch lights of the valley as dim and fuzzy as fireflies.

“I wish you’d known Mona,” I said.

“I know. I do, too.”

I was quiet for a while. “Do I talk about my past too much?”

“No, honey . . . not for me.”

“It’s just that there’s so *much* of it.”

He chuckled, then climbed out of my arms and sat on the underwater bench, pulling me next to him. As silly-old-fool as it sounds, I never stop being astounded by the sheer accessibility of that body, that heart, that “mortal, guilty, but—to me—the entirely beautiful” comrade that W. H. Auden—the ultimate silly old fool—taught gay men to dream about. “What made you think of Mona?” he asked.

“Just joy, I guess. You take me back to my best times. I feel connected to them again.” (This was true enough, but not the whole truth. I was also dwelling on the pain of impermanence, the way love is always on loan, never the nest egg we want it to be.)

Ben put his hand on my thigh and squeezed.

“Anything specific?”

I grinned. “The Jockey Shorts contest at the Endup.”

“When?”

“Late seventies, I guess.”

“You went to it?”

“I entered it.”

“No way.”

“Doesn’t sound like me, does it? I wasn’t nearly as self-conscious back then. I’d take off my clothes at the drop of a hat. I went to orgies like they were brunches.”

Ben chuckled.

“Some of them *were* brunches . . . come to think of it. Anyway . . . I won the fucking thing . . . the dance contest, I mean. They must’ve given points for boyish panic.”

“What does this have to do with Mona?”

“She was *there*. She was cheering me on.”

“Ah.”

“She just *knew* me, you know? There was no bullshitting that woman. When she gave you hell about something, it felt like the deepest kind of love.”

Ben laid his head on my shoulder, saying nothing.

“She used to say she didn’t need a lover at all—just five good friends.”

“You must’ve been one of them.”

“I suppose.” I surprised both of us with a long, histrionic sigh. “I really should have gone to England more often.”

I wasn’t feeling guilty. What I felt was the depletion of my memory bank, a hunger for more memories to hoard. I like remembering Mona at Easley House, the “simple English country dyke” she claimed she’d always wanted to be, but those images are few and far between and have largely been overpowered by the older ones: Mona at the Endup, Mona on the nude beach at Devil’s Slide, Mona stashing her Quaaludes in a ceramic figurine of Scarlett O’Hara. The Mona who stays with me is the late-seventies model: loose-limbed and free as a sailor, with coils of lava-red hair radiating from her head. I can even remember the telltale sound of her footsteps (both the manic and depressive varieties) on the boardwalk at Barbary Lane. Mona had a full seven years on me back then, so I’d felt like her little brother. Now that I’ve passed the age she was when she died it’s deeply unnerving to realize that she’s becoming my little sister.

The same is true of Jon, my first partner—only more so, of course, since he’s now been gone for—Jesus!—almost a quarter of a century. How impossibly young we were then. Jon was a gynecologist (I know, I know) and a lovely guy inside and out, if a little buttoned-down around the edges. Had he not died but simply moved to a distant city, I wonder if we’d recognize each other today were our paths to cross at a B&B in P-town, say, or an RSVP cruise to someplace warm and homophobic. Would there still be something he could love—that *I* could love, for that matter—or would we just swap email addresses and walk away, preferring to remember the old version of ourselves?

The young version, that is.

The only version I have left of him.

And this version of Ben, this gentle otter-sleek creature holding on to me in the amniotic warmth of the hot tub, will one day prove just as ephemeral. If the virus doesn’t claim me, then old age will start playing dirty soon enough. And once I’ve slipped from Ben’s Greek ideal of a loving daddy into irreversible granddaddyhood, he will surely require another lover. Not just an occasional sex partner but a lover, someone warm and strong to confide in about the hardships of coping with . . . me. Could I give him my blessing? Could I love him enough to be that big? How much was this going to hurt?

“You could take me there,” he said softly.

I was lost in the undergrowth of my dread. “What, sweetie?”

“To England. I’d love to see that house.”

I told him that would certainly be possible, that Mona’s son, Wilfred, still lived there and would probably welcome a chance to see us.

“Let’s do it, then,” he said. “I want to go everywhere you’ve been.”

This was all I needed for my heart to swell: a plan for the future, the promise of new memories, one more shot at the pipe dream of forever.

I sealed the deal with a peck on the side of his head.

“Okay,” I said, “and then we’ll go somewhere that’ll just be ours.”

Here and Now

The new version of the de Young Museum is where the old one used to be: adjacent to the Japanese tea garden and just across the road from the music concourse. It's a sprawling, low-slung building sheathed in copper panels with perforations that are meant to suggest the dappling effect of sunlight through leaves. That's a bit of a stretch, but I do love the building. Its contorted rectilinear tower—*Road Warrior* by way of the Mayans—rises above the park like a mystery begging to be solved. The whole thing will become even more magical when the copper corrodes and recedes into the greenery.

I parked the Prius in a new underground lot—an odd concept for old-time park-goers like Anna and me—and we made our way across the concourse through a regiment of recently barbered trees. As we approached the museum, I stopped in front of a favorite landmark, a bronze Beaux Arts statue of a loin-clothed hunk straining at a cider press.

“Shall we take a breather?” I asked, conscious of Anna's limited energy.

She gave me a sly-dog look, casting her eyes heavenward at the near-perfect naked haunches flexing above us. “Is *that* what you call it?”

“C'mon,” I said. “Lemme get my jollies.”

Anna pulled a tissue from her velvet bag and dabbed at her watery eyes. “I should think you'd get enough of those at home.”

I smiled at this odd-familiar blend of maternal scolding and man-to-man ribbing. In some ways, I felt more linked to Anna's generation than I did to Ben's, though the gap was considerably wider. Not only had Anna been where I was going, she had seen where I had been. We fit together naturally, like the two Edie Beales, if those old dames had been nice to each other. These days, I realized, Anna and I even shared the watery-eye thing, since

the slightest nip in the air can make me leak like a colander. I find myself telling sympathetic strangers that I'm perfectly fine, thank you, and having a lovely day.

"Is there one in there for me?" I asked, nodding toward her bag.

She tugged at the drawstring, her hand fluttering slightly.

"I'd carry them myself," I added, "but I'd be blotting all the time. I'd look like Madame Butterfly."

She smiled, handing me a fresh tissue. "Nothing wrong with that."

I gave my eyes a serious blotting. "Easy for you to say, Kimono Girl. I still wanna look like *him*." I jerked my head toward the sinewy statue.

"Oh dear," said Anna, widening her eyes.

"I know . . . never mind."

"Where is Shawna meeting us?"

"In the café. At three."

"Good. Very clever of you."

"Yeah, at least we'll be sitting if she's not on time."

One of the trademarks of Shawna's young womanhood is her chronic tardiness. For the mastermind of a budding blog empire she's appallingly disorganized. By my count she's lost three cell phones in the last two years. It must be the artistic thing.

"Meanwhile," said Anna, "you and I will climb the tower."

I took her arm again. "As Jimmy Stewart said to Kim Novak."

It was a nervous response more than anything. Anna had mentioned the tower twice already that day, and it seemed to carry a certain weight for her.

Unless I was imagining things.

Inside, the museum had a casual meandering quality that defied the dramatically blank exterior. It was tempting to wander, to get a little lost amid the textiles and oceanic art, but I wasn't sure how taxing the climb to the tower would be.

As it happened, there was an elevator. We rode it to a glass-walled observation deck that turned the park into a dark-green comforter flung over the city. We were higher than anything around, yet still low enough to see birds threading through the trees. It was like a fire tower in a well-groomed forest, bordered on every side by bay or sea or city.

"Well," said Anna softly, seeing the view, "this is a new one."

I murmured my agreement. There was a long mutual silence—the silence of churchgoers—as we gazed at the mystic model-train village laid out before us.

“It’s good to be a tourist,” Anna said at last. “We joke about them, but it’s quite a worthwhile thing. To . . . appreciate . . . deliberately.”

The way she broke up the words told me we’d moved into another realm.

“I’ve *tried* to do that,” she went on. “To name the things that have brought me joy.” She didn’t look at me as she took my hand in hers. It was as large as mine but fragile. Cool silk over bones. “You’ve been good company, Michael. You’ve been a good son. I want you to know that. Here and now.” She was briskly efficient about this, like someone tidying up before a trip. I couldn’t handle it; I sabotaged the moment.

“You’re not planning to jump, are you?”

She squeezed my hand reprovingly. “I want you to hear this, dear.”

“I’m hearing it . . . I hear you.”

“Good.” She squeezed my hand again, as if to seal the deal.

I should have reciprocated and told her everything she’d meant to me, but I couldn’t. It would have felt too official somehow, too final. I told myself there would be other times, better opportunities, that it didn’t really have to be here and now.

The café overlooked the sculpture garden. It was a little too big for a café, and a little too austere, despite the gumdrop globes dangling whimsically from the ceiling. We ordered sandwiches made with chunky slabs of bread. Mine was roast beef, Brie, and horseradish mayonnaise. Anna, somewhat to my amusement, chose the peanut butter and strawberry jam. Most of the ingredients were “artisanal,” according to our server.

“Such a peculiar word,” Anna observed. “Like they hammered it out on an anvil. Or wove it on a loom. Why can’t they just say homemade?”

Right on—as we used to say. Sometimes Northern California just wears me the fuck down, and I get fed up with our precious *patois*, our fetishizing of almost everything. Then I remember the places (some of them not that far away) where no one seems to mind if milkshakes taste like chemicals and tomatoes taste like nothing at all.

Which made me think of Florida. And Irwin.

"My brother called," I began. "He's coming out to visit."

"That's nice."

"It's not exactly to visit. It's just to talk, apparently."

Her brow wrinkled as she munched laboriously on her sandwich.

"It's not about our mother," I said. "At least, I don't think it is."

"Was there . . . friction when you were in Florida?"

"Nothing to speak of. He was sweeter than usual, actually. We got drunk together in his boat."

"That doesn't sound very safe."

I smiled. "It wasn't moving. It was out in his yard. He goes there to get away from his wife."

Anna dabbed demurely at her mouth with a napkin. "I've always wondered why you don't talk about him."

I shrugged. "Nothing to talk about. I'm going to hell and he's not."

"Oh . . . *that*."

"And I think he's pissed at me now, to be honest."

"Why?"

"Because Mama told me something she didn't tell him."

"Oh, my." She widened her eyes melodramatically as if to suggest that this was merely about two grown boys quarreling, a conventional case of sibling rivalry.

"I know it sounds silly," I said, "but he really seemed to be hurt. I felt bad for him. For better or worse, he and Lenore have been tending to Mama ever since Papa died . . . and she ends up confiding in me . . . a virtual stranger in the scheme of things."

"You're hardly that."

"No . . . I am, believe me. She's wanted it that way. She's been terrified of me for years. We're from different planets now."

"So . . . what did she tell you?"

"That she tried to leave my father several times."

Anna set her sandwich down. "For any particular reason?"

"I presume because he was a domineering old bastard."

She nodded thoughtfully. "That's all?"

"Does it take more than that?"

"Well . . . usually."

I smiled at her sardonically. “In the strange twilight world of the heterosexual.”

Anna wasn’t having it. “In *anybody’s* world. When did she last try to leave him?”

“Just before he died. Almost twenty years ago.”

“Well, that’s even more peculiar.”

I shrugged. “It sort of . . . solved the problem, I guess.”

“Dear . . . how could it have solved *anything*? There must be huge unresolved feelings. No wonder she wanted to tell you.”

“I guess.”

“You *know*. It’s mostly the *unspoken* things that always cause trouble later. They find their way out of us one way or the other.”

I wondered for a moment if that was code of some sort, if she was really referring to my awkward silence in the tower when she called me her son.

But I knew she didn’t work that way.

Shawna, amazingly, was on time, striding into the café in a butt-gripping tweed skirt that embraced her calves almost as snugly. She wore big clunky librarian glasses and her hair was more Bettie Page than before, draped on the back of her neck like a sleek black pelt. I thought of Mona, strangely enough, someone Shawna had met only once or twice as a child and did not particularly resemble. There was the same sense of fashion, though—studied and anarchistic all at once—and the same bubbling volcanic spirit. It gave me an unexpected pang. I wondered if Anna ever noticed the similarity.

“You guys,” Shawna piped as she approached the table. “I have to show you something really fierce.”

“And a good afternoon to you,” said Anna.

Shawna kissed Anna on the top of her head by way of a greeting, then twiddled her fingers at me. “You look like you’re finished. Is this a bad time?”

“No,” said Anna. “It’s a wonderful time.” She pushed back her chair and attempted to rise, wobbling slightly in the process.

Shawna reached for her instinctively, supporting her under the elbow. “It’s not that far, don’t worry.”

“I’m fine,” said Anna.

“We’ve already been up to the tower,” I explained, casting a glance at Shawna. “We’re a little pooped.”

“No problem,” said Shawna, turning back to Anna as she steered her out of the café. “That bag is the bomb, by the way.”

“Thank you, dear. It was my mother’s.”

“No shit? At the whorehouse? How fierce is that?”

Shawna has lately been fascinated by the fact that Anna was raised in a brothel in Nevada. Anna had no shame about this, of course, but she felt the need to clarify things.

“It was actually her *good* bag. She took it into Winnemucca with her. Usually to church.”

With her free hand Shawna petted the bag as if it were a small, delicate mammal. “The velvet’s held up beautifully.”

Anna nodded. “It was much better in those days. The velvet.”

“I’m sure.”

“I’ll put your name on it.”

Shawna looked puzzled.

“The bag,” Anna explained. “I’ll put your name on it.”

Shawna shot me a stricken glance, grasping her meaning.

“Say thank you,” I told her.

“Oh my God,” said Shawna, looking moved and a little bit shaken. “Thank you . . . yes . . . thank you so much, Anna.”

“Where are we going?” asked Anna, all business again.

“Just up one level,” Shawna replied. “This thing just blew me away.”

The object of her awe was an early-twentieth-century oil by Arthur Bowen Davies called *Pacific Parnassus*. It was basically the ocean side of Mount Tam, Marin’s own pinnacle of the gods, made riotous here by swirling fog and golden slopes above a cobalt sea. It was painted in 1905 but it could easily have been yesterday. The things that made it enchanting were still here, still ours. I saw what Shawna meant. Or thought I did.

“This is what I’ll miss,” she said. “You know?”

“I do,” said Anna. I knew she’d be missing Shawna as much as any of us, but her tone was more celebratory than sad.

I told Shawna the painting was captivating, but I’d expected something a little more avant-garde from her.

“The guy was totally avant-garde. He was practically a pagan. He identified with the Ashcan school . . . and he was even a Cubist for a while.”

“Still . . . this could be a jigsaw puzzle.”

“I’ll forget you said that. Look closer.”

I leaned into the painting, studying the landscape. “Is there a giant penis in the clouds or something?”

“Close. Check out the mountainside.”

It took me a while to find them, since they were almost the color of the fields and barely bigger than a paper clip. “People,” I said. “Naked people, in fact.”

“You are *correct*, sir,” said Shawna, imitating Ed McMahon on the Carson show. She used to do that when she was seven years old, charming the dickens out of grown-ups. She might be young, I thought, but she does remember Johnny and Ed.

“Where are they?” asked Anna, stepping closer to the painting. “I don’t see them.”

“Here,” I said, pointing. “And here . . . and there’s a couple down here in the trees.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Anna yanked open her bag and removed an enormous magnifying glass with an ornate handle fashioned from junk-shop silverware. I don’t know exactly *why* it struck me as hilarious but it did, seeing her there in her sneakers and her turban and Chinese grandma pajamas examining the canvas like Inspector Clouseau on the trail of a murderer. Shawna, I was glad to see, found it humorous, too, so we both dissolved in giggles—to Anna’s mounting annoyance.

“Stop it, children. Don’t make a scene.”

“Are they girls or boys?” Shawna asked, prolonging the mirth.

Anna’s eyes were still glued to the glass. “I presume they’re gods, if this is Parnassus.”

“Maybe they’re picnickers from Mill Valley.” This was my contribution.

“Really,” said Anna, putting the glass away. “How old are you two?”

Shawna looked chastened. “I just figured you’d think it was cool.”

“It is, dear. It’s extremely cool.”

“We weren’t laughing at *you*,” I put in, taking her arm. “Just that thing.”

“It’s very handy,” said Anna. “You’ll see.”

We spent another half-hour drifting through galleries until Anna discreetly expressed her need for “the ladies room.” When we found it, Shawna asked if she needed assistance. Anna shook her head with a smile. “I’m fine, dear,” she said, before turning to me halfway through the door. “I’ll need to go home, though, after this. Notch will be cross with me.”

The door swung shut. Shawna turned to me with a slack expression.

“Who the hell is Notch?”

I grinned at her. “I’d introduce you, but she’s still under the armoire.”

Memory Foam

My husband was doing yoga in the bedroom, attempting the union of body and soul, while I was nattering away. I was pleasantly stoned by then and lobbying for a quiet evening on the sofa with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Ben had never seen the film, so I had TiVo'd it in the hope of enlightening him. I was droning on about this wonderful, moody, romantic story and its brilliant author, John Fowles, and the other atmospheric movies—*The Collector* and *The Magus*—made from Fowles' novels.

This is typical of me. Given pot and the nearness of Ben I can be a crashing bore. Ben has a master's degree (and I don't, of course), but I somehow feel compelled to play teacher when we're together, to tell him every little thing he missed by being young. It's tempting to do this because he listens so generously, even with a foot behind his head.

When his cell phone rang, he sighed at this final invasion of his peace.

"Shall I check it?" I asked.

"Please."

I took the phone from the nightstand and looked at the readout. "It's Leo," I said.

Ben untangled his limbs and took the phone from me. I returned to my Morris chair and picked up a magazine, knowing that Ben would not require privacy.

"Say hi for me," I told him.

I've met two of Ben's exes: this one, Leo, the retired Suburu dealer from South Bend, and Paolo, the Italian stockbroker from Sardinia. They are both nice guys, but except for the fact that we're all (I'm told) uncut and pushing sixty from one side or the other, we are wildly unlike. It intrigues me to think that each of us has spent significant time with Ben; each has

been his answer to something. But I don't feel especially competitive in their presence; I feel like a clue, a piece of the puzzle. It's much easier not to be threatened by your lover's exes if you don't want to fuck them yourself.

Ben took the call on the bed. This was our new Tempurpedic mattress, designed by Swedes or NASA or somebody to conform to every contour. We ordered it on an impulse at the Denver airport last Christmas when we were visiting Ben's family. Seeing him there on his stomach, pale and glistening in his briefs, I imagined the imprint his package would make on the memory foam, like a nifty Jell-O mold.

"So how's our favorite Wilted Flower?" Ben asked his ex.

Leo and his friend Bill, who worked for Allstate back in South Bend, had recently moved to Fort Lauderdale and bought a little ranch house in Wilton Manors, the gay neighborhood. Most of the homeowners were fairly old and fairly well off, so Wilted Flowers had become the pejorative-of-choice for locals who saw themselves as neither.

Leo's friend Bill is just that, by the way—a friend. The two have never been lovers. They just got tired of selling and wanted to share a place in the sun. As far as I can tell, they've both relinquished romance without a fuss. They garden and play bridge and throw luaus for their neighbors and never have to negotiate the politics of three-ways and afternoons at the baths. They will grow old together, those two, tucked in their separate beds (with their separate collections of porn). There must be a certain comfort in knowing that the guy across the cornflakes in the morning has noticed, just like you, how short the days are getting. At least you're at the finish line together.

There's something to be said for that, no doubt.

But would I trade it for what I have with Ben?

God no. Not in a million years. Not while love is still something I can taste and touch and nurture and pull down the pants of. Not while I still have a shot at this.

I'm the lucky one here, of course. It was Ben who got the short end of the stick. The double whammy of HIV and advancing age makes me a pretty shaky deal in the happily-ever-after department. I can at least *dream* of one day dying in my lover's arms, but he can't do the same with me. He'll have another life entirely, for better or worse.

“Hey,” he said, speaking to me but still on the phone. “What’s twenty feet long, shaped like a snake, and smells like urine?”

I looked up from my magazine. “Say what?”

“It’s a riddle. Leo just told it to me.”

“I give up. What’s twenty feet long, shaped like a snake, and smells like urine?”

“The conga line at Chardee’s!”

I frowned at him. “What the hell is Chardee’s?”

“You know. The restaurant in Wilton Manors. The supper club. Where the older guys go to get drunk.”

I made a face at him. “Lovely.”

Ben laughed. “It was Leo’s joke.”

“Well, tell him he’s a sick fuck. A sick *old* fuck.”

Ben obliged. “He says you’re a sick old fuck.”

I could hear Leo hooting, enjoying the hell out of this.

“Ask him,” I told Ben, “if he can spell *gerontophobia*.”

Ben wouldn’t take it that far. It wasn’t fair to pick on Leo, however gently. He was too harmless for that. “Cut him some slack,” Ben whispered. “It’s funny.”

“Hilarious,” I said, returning to my magazine. “Old people pissing themselves.”

Ben ignored me and spoke to the phone again. “Yeah, sure . . . he loved it . . . he always loves your jokes.”

It must have been the Florida connection that got me thinking about my brother’s impending visit. That steel-trap mind of mine had me gnawing off my leg again. As we lay on the sofa after the movie, Ben noticed the distraction in my eyes.

“What’s up, babe?”

“Oh, just . . . the Irwin thing. He sounded so stricken when we talked.”

Ben nodded slowly, his intuition confirmed. “Bring him to the house, then. I’ll still be at work. You guys can talk all you want.”

“He didn’t seem to want that. And how can I tell *where* we should talk, if I don’t know what he wants to talk about?”

Ben shrugged. “Give Patreese a call. If it’s anything at all to do with your mom, he might have some idea.”

I thought that was brilliant and told him so.

"I try," said Ben.

I found Patreese's cell-phone number on my copy of the power of attorney. He had scribbled it on the bottom at the very last minute, in case we needed him.

"It's almost midnight there," I pointed out.

"He'll be up. And if he's not, he doesn't have to answer."

He answered, as it happened, on the fifth ring. There was noise in the background: screaming, drunken female voices. "Yeah?" he said, shouting above the din.

"It's Michael Tolliver."

"Who?"

"Alice's son. From San Francisco."

"Oh, Lord, honey. How are you doin'?"

"Great," I said, relieved by his cheerful acknowledgment. "I'm here with Ben." I swapped a private smile with my husband. "Is this a bad time?"

"Nah. These crazy bitches can just cool their engines. Hang on, my brother." He was gone for a matter of seconds while he must have closed a door somewhere, since the din was largely gone when he returned. "That better?" he asked.

"Much. You workin' a gig or something?"

"Yeah. Fuckin' bachelorettes. I'm changin' into my sailor outfit."

I bugged my eyes for Ben. "He's changing into his sailor outfit."

Ben laughed.

"Listen," I said to Patreese. "I won't keep you but . . . my brother's coming out to see me tomorrow, and he's been acting really peculiar since we got home."

"Uh-huh." This was noncommittal at best.

"Has something . . . happened around there?"

"Around where?"

"The Gospel Palms."

A long silence and then: "Well . . . your mama had a fight with ol' whatshername . . . Lenore. I reckon that must be it."

"A fight?"

“Yeah. Knock-down-drag-out. She don’t want her comin’ around anymore.”

“Was this about the power-of-attorney thing?”

Another puzzling silence. “I don’t really know for sure.”

“Yes you do, Patreese. She tells you everything.”

Patreese cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Sorry, Michael . . . I can’t do this. You just wait and talk to your brother. You’ll be fine. I don’t feel right about gettin’ all tangled up in family matters. It wouldn’t be fair to you, either.”

“Okay,” I said evenly.

“A lotta shit shakes loose when folks are dying. You don’t need to hear it from the hairdresser.”

What on earth? I thought.

“You’re not pissed at me, are you?”

“No . . . of course not.”

“I saw your mama day before yesterday. She’s no better . . . but she looked a lot more at peace, you know? Now that she’s spoken her peace.”

Someone must have opened the door, because that mindless estrogen roar was drowning us out again. “I gotta go,” said Patreese. “Say hey to that sweet thing o’ yours. I’ll call if there’s any change with your mama. Don’t you worry.”

Before I could thank him he was gone. I closed the phone and turned to Ben.

“Now I’m really freaked,” I said.

Keep Me Company

The restaurant at the Airport Marriott was called JW's Steakhouse, presumably after old Mr. Marriott himself, the archconservative Mormon billionaire. It made sense that my brother had picked it. This was a piece of *his* America, clean and predictable, a safe refuge at the gates of Sodom. Whatever his mission today, Irwin would feel better here, buffered by families and beef-eating businessmen. These were his peeps.

Me . . . I'd never felt so out of town this close to the city.

Irwin had chosen a quiet corner of the restaurant. He stood up when he saw me, fussing reflexively—and rather touchingly, I felt—with his comb-over. When we were face-to-face, he thrust out his arm and grabbed my elbow with the other. He'd learned this trick from our father, an acknowledged master at keeping love at arm's length.

"Hey, bro," he said. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem . . . I was already in the neighborhood, so . . ."

"Sit down, sit down." He was too distracted to joke. "You ordered yet?"

"Irwin . . . I just got here."

He looked mortified. "I meant . . . you know . . . would you like to?" He handed me the menu. "These places are pretty dependable. I've been to the one in Anaheim and the one in Philly. Fine cuisine every time. The Cowboy Steak can't be beat."

At eighteen ounces the Cowboy Steak would have choked a coyote, so when the waitress arrived, I ordered the seared tuna. "That'll be good, too," Irwin offered gamely. "It's all good here." Then, without a word to me, he ordered double scotches for both of us.

"Hey," I said. "I've got clients this afternoon."

"Just bring 'em," Irwin told the waitress.

When she was gone, there was a lead-footed silence, so I jumped into the breach and asked him, as tactfully as possible, what the hell was going on.

“First off,” he replied, “it’s not about you havin’ the power of attorney. I know about that and I don’t care. Mama can die whenever she pleases. She’ll get no trouble from me. I want to make her as comfortable as possible. She knows that, too.”

I nodded, wondering how he’d found out. “Does Lenore feel that way?”

His expression grew stony. “She’s got nothin’ to do with this. You and me are the next of kin, and that’s that. Whatever we say goes.”

“Maybe so, but Mama seems to think that Lenore—”

“Fuck Lenore!”

Under other circumstances, I might have teased him about the language, but there was real anguish in his eyes. He ran his palm along the tabletop, smoothing out his thoughts. “Lenore moved out last week. She’s living with Mel Brook.”

He said Brook, of course, not Brooks—I heard that clearly—but I got the visual, anyway: Lenore humping away on the beloved entertainer. There had to be a joke in there somewhere—maybe about Christians needing Jews for the rapture, or Lenore confusing Mel Brooks with Mel Gibson—but I managed to restrain myself.

“Is Mel Brook . . . someone I should know?”

He shook his head. His right eye flinched convulsively a couple of times—a tic I hadn’t seen before. “Just this gal she knows from Sunday school.”

Now I had a new image of Mel: a Bible-toting dyke in a gray mullet and a polyester pantsuit. I couldn’t help myself: “She left you for a woman?”

“No! . . . Hell, no!” He looked like I’d smacked him in the face with a dead flounder. “She didn’t leave me for anybody. I . . . banished her.”

“*Banished* her? . . . Jesus, Irwin.”

“Could we leave His name out of this?”

“Then don’t talk like a biblical patriarch. Who the hell says ‘banished’?”

“I asked her to leave. I told her to leave. Stop messing with me, Mikey. This is tough enough as it is.”

I offered him penitent silence, then spoke in a more reasonable tone. “What happened? Y’all always seemed pretty content to me.”

That was not the right word, of course. *Complacent* would have been closer to the truth. Irwin and Lenore weren't as lovey-dovey as they once were, but they seemed resigned to each other for the rest of their days. They had their McMansion and their grandkid and their Personal Savior, and that had seemed a gracious plenty.

Lenore, you should know, wasn't always such a tight-ass. When Irwin was courting her back in the seventies, she was still the social director at a convention hotel in Tallahassee and something of a firecracker. She was Christian, but she didn't make a fuss about it. She was pretty and perky and sometimes very funny, and my folks were openly amazed that their crazy-ass delinquent son had landed someone so presentable.

This was roughly the time they learned of my "lifestyle," so they were thrilled to have a shot at breeding grandchildren. Irwin bought a split-level house just down Abbott Springs Road, and the four of them—Mama and Papa and Irwin and Lenore—became a functioning unit. Mama would write me effusively about their long road trips in Irwin's Buick: one to Colorado, as I recall, and another to New York to see *Cats* on Broadway. For almost a decade they were Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel, and it got to me more than I would ever have imagined. I would not have traveled with them for anything in the world, but I felt a little jealous sometimes. More of an outsider than ever.

Then Papa died and I announced my antibody status and Mama dug deeper into Jesus, taking Lenore with her. The reason seemed clear at the time: they had already lost one Tolliver man and were almost certain to lose another. Whatever their petty rivalries over the years, grief had made them sisters in salvation. Or so I believed. Irwin did, too, poor bastard, so he began strangling his cuss words and praising the Lord to placate the women he loved. Like me, a fellow male, he was oblivious to the *real* bond between Mama and Lenore, the secret they had planned on taking to their graves.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Irwin's eye was flinching again.

"Do you remember," he said slowly, "what you told me out in the boat?"

It took me a moment. "About Mama wanting to leave Papa?"

He nodded darkly.

I still wasn't getting it.

"It's the same reason, Mikey."

"The same reason as *what*?"

Right about then our drinks arrived, though I have no memory whatsoever of interacting with the waitress. The glasses just materialized and remained there undisturbed, while my eyes stayed glued on my brother's flinching eye.

"The same reason as what?" I repeated.

"The same reason I threw Lenore out. Her and Papa . . . they were having a . . . I mean, you know, they'd been . . ." He lifted his palms from the table and tilted them to parenthesize the unspeakable. The gesture wasn't graphic but it screamed its meaning.

I gaped at him. "How do you know this?"

"Mama told me last week. Right after you left."

"Papa and *Lenore*?"

"Don't make me say it again." He reached for his scotch and drank half of it, then pushed the other glass toward me. "Keep me company."

I picked up the glass, took a swig, and set it down again.

"Jesus," I murmured.

"Mikey—"

"Sorry." I hardly knew where to start. "When did this happen?"

"Just before Papa died. Mama drove up to Deltona to spend the day at that big outlet store, but it was closed for some holiday . . . Martin Luther King or something . . . so she came back. She couldn't find Papa at the house, so she went down to our place. They didn't even lock the door. She found 'em in the family room."

"*In flagrante*?"

Irwin flinched violently. "I don't know *how* they were doing it."

I did my best not to smile. "I mean . . . they were actually in the midst of . . . ?"

"Yes sir. Yes they were." Irwin just rocked for a while, his hands between his knees, like one of those plastic birds bobbing into a glass of water.

"All righty," I said, always ready with the brotherly wisdom.

"Mama said they were buck naked."

I wanted to be the unhysterical one. I wanted to guide my brother rationally through the labyrinth of sex like enlightened queers are supposed to do. But I screwed up my face as if I'd just caught a whiff of a flaming cow pie.

"Papa just hit the ceiling," Irwin went on. "Throwin' stuff all over the place. Like Mama was the one who'd done something wrong."

Wouldn't he just? I thought.

Irwin polished off the rest of his scotch. "And then he died."

"What?"

"He had a heart attack. Right there in front of them."

"But he died of cancer."

"Cancer can cause heart attacks. The coroner just considered it . . . a complication."

"I'll say. Was Papa still naked when the coroner arrived?"

Irwin shook his head. "They got his clothes back on and put him on the sofa with the clicker."

"The clicker?"

"Like he was watching TV when it happened."

"Jesus . . . sorry, sorry!"

Irwin offered me a weary smile. "You're entitled."

"In that case, Jesus H. Christ! How the hell did Mama make it through the funeral? She looked so . . . composed."

"I guess she was kinda in shock. She said she prayed a lot."

"Did that help?"

Irwin scowled at my sacrilege.

"It's people who have to be good to us, Irwin. Not God."

"You think I don't know that?"

I apologized for the preachiness—the last thing he needed right now. Still, I couldn't help thinking how *biblical* the whole thing sounded. All that begetting and begatting among kinfolk. Not to mention those wailing women dressing the dead patriarch.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Out showin' a house. By the time I got home, Papa was already at the funeral parlor."

"And Mama and Lenore had worked out their story."

"Yep."

We just sat there for a moment, silent as men, working out our own story, each in his own way. "It's just so . . . pathetic," I said finally.

"What?"

"That Mama just buried it all these years. She never had closure of any kind."

"She didn't want folks to know. She didn't want *me* to know. And Lenore sure as hell didn't want me to know. Mama was pretty much stuck, I reckon. So they drove up to Georgia after the funeral and got born again where nobody would know 'em."

"I'm sorry . . . *who* did?"

"Mama and Lenore. The preacher baptized 'em both. One after the other. Little church on the highway. One o' those aboveground pools."

"Did you know about this at the time?"

"Sure."

"And that didn't strike you as strange?"

Irwin shrugged. "Mama said the womenfolk had to grieve on their own. And Lenore was a Presbyterian, so she'd never been born again. I just reckoned Mama was killin' two birds with one stone. So I stayed home and took Kimberly to Disney World."

Poor Mama, I thought, living with this gothic shit for almost twenty years, protecting Irwin's heart at any cost, while Papa got off scot-free and Lenore grew more and more sanctimonious with guilt. No wonder Lenore had been so solicitous of Mama. And no wonder my unapologetic homosexuality became their mutual obsession; it was something they could fix together, a sin that, unlike Papa's, could still be eradicated.

"So why did she change her mind?"

"Who?"

"Mama. Why did she spill the beans now?"

"Her and Lenore were at each other's throats all week, so I went out to the Gospel Palms and told Mama she owed Lenore some respect since Lenore only wanted the best for her. And Mama went ballistic, said she didn't wanna die lookin' at that evil woman's face, and I asked her why on earth she would say such a thing, and . . . she told me."

"In front of Lenore?"

"No. I went to Lenore myself. She was doin' a puppet show up in Eustis."

I could almost see the felt flying. “What did she say?”

“She said it happened only once or twice, and she did it to keep peace in the family.”

“*What?*”

“Papa had been at her for years, she said. She just wanted to put it to rest.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I don’t know what I believe,” said Irwin.

Terms of Abasement

My brother's second drink arrived with the food. He polished it off before the waitress left and ordered another.

"You sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure," he said, sawing ferociously into his steak.

I felt awful for him. As Papa's innately unacceptable son, I'd known the sting of the old man's narcissism for decades, but Irwin had been blindsided in the worst possible way. "He didn't do it to hurt you," I told him. "He did it because he could—because everything revolved around him. He didn't think about anyone else. He took what he wanted."

He grunted as he chewed on a mouthful of steak.

"I'm really sorry, Irwin."

Another grunt.

"At least you'll have the Promise Keepers."

"Say what?"

"The convention in San Jose. That should be a good boost for your spirits. The fellowship and all."

Silence.

"What's the matter?"

"There's no convention," he said. "I just said that because . . . I didn't want you to think I was comin' out just to see you."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Too much pressure, I guess."

"Pressure? On *who*?"

"I dunno—"

"I *like* the pressure, Irwin. I like that you thought of me."

He stared bleakly at the tabletop. "Who else am I'm gonna think of?"

It wasn't the declaration one might have hoped for, but it almost warmed my heart. Unless that was the scotch. Whatever the reason, I was grinning over a brand-new irony.

"You *lied* about the Promise Keepers?"

We circled the grotesquerie again and again, making less and less sense of it. When Irwin was done with his third drink, I decided to cut to the chase.

"So what are you gonna do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you gonna . . . lift the banishment?"

He made a nervous circle on the table with his glass. "How can I live with her now, knowing what happened?"

I shrugged. "How can you not?"

"I could do it . . . believe you me."

"Irwin, you can't make scrambled eggs."

"Well, that's not—"

"Has she asked for forgiveness?"

"She said she asks the Lord every day."

"Has she asked *you*?"

"I s'pose . . . I was yellin' a lot."

"Understandably."

A long silence.

"Do you still love her?"

"Mikey . . . she did this in our house! Her and Papa were—"

"I've got the picture, Irwin. But it was eighteen years ago, and you've got a nice new house and a sweet grandkid, and you and Lenore are each other's person in the world. The only way to take your life back is to forgive her. It's obvious she's tried to atone for this. She's been atoning us to death for years. Forgive her and stop the damn puppets."

I caught him suppressing a smile.

"You must love her," I added. "You bought her a Thomas Kinkade." (I couldn't believe I was citing that god-awful "chapel in the dell" as proof of anything, but a desperate situation called for desperate measures.)

"It's not as simple as that," said Irwin. "Mama never wants to see her again."

“Then see that she doesn’t. Tell Lenore to stay away from the Gospel Palms. That shouldn’t be hard. Just be the man—tell her what you want and what Mama wants. Isn’t that what the Promise Keepers would tell you?”

I thought I’d gone too far, but he was still listening.

“And cut yourself some slack. None of this shit is your fault. It’s okay to enjoy yourself, Irwin. Especially right now.” I widened my eyes suggestively. “If you ask me, the Lord owes you one.”

Irwin gazed at me morosely. “What do you mean?”

I picked up the bill holder and slipped my credit card into the slot. Irwin mumbled in protest, but I shooed him away. “You can pay for dinner tonight.”

“I have to get back to work,” he said nonsensically.

“You have to sober up,” I told him. “You have to go back to your room and have a nice hot shower and a nap. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“To town,” I replied.

I called Shawna as soon as I’d pulled off 101 onto Cesar Chavez.

“Hey, babycakes.”

“Oh . . . hi, Mouse.”

“Listen, sweetie . . . I need to talk to you about something.”

This must have sounded ominous to her. “Oh, shit, it’s not Dad, is it?”

“No, no. He’s fine. I mean . . . other than the foot. My brother’s in town, and he’s really depressed, and . . . I thought I might take him out tonight. I was wondering if you could recommend somebody nice at the Lusty Lady.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No . . . I’m not.”

“Your born-again brother from Orlando?”

“It’s complicated. He’s had a blow to his self-esteem, and I just wanna make him feel better for a while. Help him let off some steam, you know.”

“What does he want?”

“What do you mean?”

“In a *woman*, Mouse.”

“He doesn’t know about this, actually.”

“Okaay.”

"I just thought if there was someone . . . you know, really easygoing . . . that he could talk to . . . and mess around with maybe . . . it might make him feel better."

"And he won't consider this a sin?"

"Is it a sin if it happens behind Plexiglas?"

Shawna laughed. "Fuck if I know."

"He can always say no, if he doesn't want to. I just thought I'd pave the way for him. Make sure he got the right one."

"What would be the wrong one?"

"Well, Pacifica the Pregnant Lady for one. And *you* for another."

"I'm way past that story, Mouse. And Pacifica has a beautiful baby boy."

"I'm thrilled for you both."

"I take it you haven't been reading my blog."

"Maybe not lately."

"You should. You're in it."

"Doing what?"

"Coming to the Lusty Lady. Well, maybe not *coming*, but—"

"Jesus, Shawna—"

"Okay . . . my bad. I promise you'll like it, though. I call you my green-collar gay uncle. I didn't mention your name, if you're worried about losing your queer clients."

"Gimme a break."

"You might wanna think about Lorelei."

"What?"

"For your brother. She's blond and hella sweet, and she's famous for her feet."

"Her feet?"

"You should see them. They're perfect."

"What can you do with feet behind Plexiglas?"

"What can you do with anything behind Plexiglas? Oh, wait . . . Cressida . . . that's the one. She really digs older guys."

"Do older guys dig her?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Cressida as in *Troilus and Cressida*?"

“She used to work down at Shakespeare Santa Cruz. She listens well, and she, you know . . . talks them through it.”

“So how do we do this?”

“I’ll just call ahead and tell ’em he’s coming. What’s his name again?”

“Irwin.”

“Will you be with him?”

“Hell, no.”

“You big pussy.”

“Don’t be disrespectful.”

She giggled.

“And don’t put it in your blog, either. This is strictly private therapy. It can’t get back to Florida.”

“You have my word on it, as a pimp.”

“Thank you.”

“I think it’s sweet, actually. What you’re doing. I’ll leave a message for Cressida. Make sure he brings some cash for the slot.”

That evening I took Irwin to Joe DiMaggio’s Chophouse on Washington Square. Back when I was still living on Russian Hill, this corner was occupied by the Fior d’Italia, the city’s oldest Italian restaurant and the birthplace of chicken tetrazzini, a spaghetti dish concocted in 1908 in honor of a visiting opera singer. (Mama used to make a version of this herself, using Velveeta cheese and Campbell’s Cream of Chicken soup.) I hadn’t been to the new restaurant, but I figured its blend of baseball memorabilia and oversized Marilyn photographs would keep both of us sufficiently amused.

While Irwin was working on his first scotch, a pianist was tinkling out a dreamy rendition of “I Wanna Be Loved by You.”

“Clever,” I said, smiling. (I wasn’t drinking tonight, but I had vaporized before leaving the house.)

“What?”

“That was Marilyn Monroe’s big number from *Some Like It Hot*.”

“Don’t think I remember that one.”

“Sure you do . . . blond. Big boobs.”

Irwin shot daggers at me. “The movie, dickwad.”

It felt good to be called that again. It reminded me of the old days—the days of the unsaved Irwin—when his terms of abasement were almost a form of intimacy. We might have been back in that dinghy at Lake Tibet looking for alligators in the dark.

I smiled at him. “They had their wedding photos taken just across the square here.”

“Who?”

“Marilyn and Joe. At Saints Peter and Paul.”

“Oh.”

“They weren’t actually *married* there. They were married at City Hall.”

Irwin nodded slowly. “Like you and Ben.”

I grinned at him. “That wasn’t my point, but . . . yes . . . come to think of it. That’s pretty cool, actually.” I was touched that he’d made the connection.

“You’re too old to be saying ‘cool,’ bro.”

“You’re right. And fuck you.”

He took another slug of his drink. “It don’t mean shit, anyway.”

“What?”

“Marriage. You give it all you got, and it blows up in your face. It’s nothing but heartache in the end.”

Mama had said the very same thing when I’d told her about marrying Ben. She and Irwin had come to the same conclusion about the same moment of betrayal by the same two people. It made sense, in a way. Southern families are nothing if not close.

“I can’t forgive her, Mikey. I can’t do it. I wouldn’t know how to start.”

I shrugged. “Maybe you could forgive each other.”

He frowned. “What have *I* got to be forgiven for?”

Recognizing my cue, I reached into the pocket of my sports coat and removed the envelope I’d brought with me. I handed it to Irwin without a word. He hesitated a moment, then opened the envelope and removed the hand-tinted Victorian postcard I’d found in a Noe Valley shop earlier that afternoon. It depicted a naughty lady in a corset vamping on a saloon piano. On the back I’d written: “GOOD FOR ONE NIGHT OF FUN IN OLD FRISCO. Kearny and Broadway. Cressida.”

“Cressida?” said Irwin. “What do I need with a car?”

What Husbands Do

I've always had a thing for guys who work with wood: carpenters, lumberjacks, driftwood artists—you name it. It's their hands, more than anything, rough and graceful all at once. I remember a counselor in the crafts hut at Camp Hemlock who could make my pubescent heart turn somersaults just by dragging a plane across a plank. And later, in the seventies (or was it the eighties?), there was that woodworker on Public TV. Remember him? The dude in suspended jeans and Harry Reems mustache who seemed to be broadcasting from a log cabin in the wilderness? That was some fine craftsmanship.

No wonder I like meeting Ben at work. His studios down on Norfolk Street are part office/part workshop, and more often than not he'll be hunched over his computer. Sometimes, though, when the planets are properly aligned, I'll find him in the shop, lit by the pearly light of the translucent fiberglass roof. He'll be working shirtless in his leather apron, lightly sugared with maple dust, humming as he guides a hand-hewn tenon into a tight mortise.

Anyway, that's how it was on this particular day. Irwin had been back in Florida for almost a month, and the first signs of winter had arrived. Rain was coursing down the corrugation of the roof, and the shop was piquant with ozone and linseed oil.

Ben looked up and smiled when he saw me.

"Hey, husband."

"Hey, baby." I kissed him on the mouth. "That is fucking gorgeous." He was working on a sideboard—a long, narrow one, slightly Asian-looking.

"Thanks." He stroked the maple as if it were the flank of a beloved horse.

“I heard from Irwin today.”

“Oh, yeah? How are things with Lenore?”

“Not bad, considering . . . they’re going to Cancún for Christmas. He arranged it himself.”

“No shit.”

“I don’t know what he said to her. Or what she said to him. But . . . it’s like it never happened.”

“Maybe she told him your dad was a bum fuck.”

“Eeeeyew.”

“Sorry.”

“I think Irwin needed a secret. And a guy he could share it with . . . even if it had to be me. Mama and Lenore had their own secret for eighteen years. He just needed to level the playing field.”

“Tit for tat,” said Ben, smiling.

“Or pussy for tat, as the case may be.”

It was a lame joke, but I was trying to stay lighthearted for what had to come next: “Listen, sweetie. It’s time for me to go back. Mama’s close to checkin’ out.”

Ben absorbed my euphemism, then stroked my arm. “You okay?”

I nodded. “I called Patreese to see what he thought. He said she’s got a few days at the most. She seems to know it, too. She asked him to make her look pretty.”

Ben’s Adam’s apple bobbed. For a moment I thought he was going to cry, but he just charged toward his office. “I’ll book the tickets, then.”

“No.” I caught him by the arm. “You don’t have to, sweetie.”

“Those flights fill up fast.”

“I mean, you don’t have to go. I can do this myself. You’ve got work to do, and you’ve put up with enough already.”

“You don’t want me to?” He looked almost hurt.

“No . . . of course not. I just didn’t want to make you—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is what husbands do.” He started heading for the office again. “We don’t have to stay with Irwin and Lenore, do we?”

“God, no.”

“I’ll find us someplace nice. Does it have to be gay?”

“I don’t care. Just no orchids in the toilet.”

The rain lingered as the day wore on, so I called Jake from home and told him I wouldn't need him for a job in the Marina that afternoon. "Anyway," I added, "I've got some loose ends I need to tie up in the office today. My mother's pretty close to the end, so Ben and I are leaving on the red-eye tonight."

"Shit . . . I'm sorry, boss."

"You think you could hold down the fort for a few days?"

"Sure. No problem."

"There shouldn't be much to do, with all this rain. Mrs. Langston wants her hedges trimmed, and you know how she gets, so . . . if there's a break in the weather today—"

"I'm on the case, boss. Don't even think about it."

"Good man."

"Will you be on your cell?"

"Yeah . . . and the house'll be empty, so . . . if you and Connor, or whoever . . . wanna come hang out and use the hot tub . . . consider it your spa."

"You serious?"

"You bet. It'll be nice to think of life going on back here. You know where the key is, and there's some extra towels under the bathroom sink. Just turn off the hot tub when you leave. And don't forget to cover it or the raccoons will have a field day."

"No sweat," said Jake. "I'll tell the roomies." His failure to mention Connor made me wonder if that romance had faded because of the aforementioned plumbing issues, or if Jake was just being his usual private self. "We've got our poker game tonight," he added. "We're cooking paella. Anna's coming up for it."

"Since when does Anna play poker?"

Jake chuckled. "Since a few weeks ago. Marguerite and Selina taught her." (Those were his roommates, the teacher and the investment counselor, both trannies in their thirties.)

"Damn," I said. "She never fails to amaze me."

"She said her mom used to play it in Winnemucca."

I could picture little Anna—or Andy, as she was back then—watching her mother deal cards to her "girls" at the Blue Moon Lodge during the flapper era. Mona, lucky devil, actually got to see that ancient brothel (and

live there briefly) before her grandmother—widely known in those parts as Mother Mucca—passed away in the early eighties. The place was deserted for years, then finally torn down to make room for a casino/hotel complex, though some clever soul with a sense of history saw fit to preserve the name. Grasping for atmosphere where I’m sure there’s none to be found, the placemats at the Blue Moon Bar and Grill make coy reference to the “colorful house of ill repute” that once stood on that spot.

Anna learned all this from Bobbi, the youngest of Mother Mucca’s brood, when Bobbi came through San Francisco toward the end of the millennium. Anna remarked at the time that her mother would have pitched a fit at the notion of her house being one of “ill repute,” almost as much as she would have denounced the clinical sound of “sex worker,” the newest politically correct euphemism for hookers. Mother Mucca was an old-fashioned gal.

Bobbi was in her forties by then and no longer a hooker. She was married and living in Houston, finally making an honest living. She worked as a receptionist at Enron.

I called Brian at the nursery to tell him about Mama—not for comfort, really, just to keep him in the loop. I was already feeling guilty about not having shared Irwin’s crisis with Brian, since I know he would have gotten a kick out of the whole gruesome mess. But telling that story—and the solution I’d offered—would have brought Shawna into the picture, and that would not have amused her father nearly as much. Besides, my gift to Irwin had been a secret of his own, so my obligation—I told myself—was to keep it that way.

Secrets and lies, I thought as I hung up the phone. *After thirty years of insisting on the truth, I’m still my mother’s son. The orange doesn’t fall very far from the tree.*

I spent the rest of the afternoon doing laundry and online banking. My business account was disastrously low—given that I was leaving town—so I rounded up some stray checks from clients and made a mental note to deposit them at the airport. I hate the grim little dance of finance and always have; it’s so lifeless and unyielding, the antithesis of planting a garden. Money, if you ask me, has no right at all to be green.

Ben wouldn't be home before dark—there was still that sideboard to finish—so I began to pack for both of us. I started with my compartmentalized pill box, filling it with a week's worth of meds—just in case. Then I chose a suit bag for both our dark suits: Ben's nice new navy-blue one from Nordstrom and the ancient black crepe one I finally bought in the late eighties when funerals were proving more commonplace than theme parties. (I'd let out the waist a few times, but it was still holding up all right.)

I figured that the rest of our clothes could be casual, so I filled a duffel bag with jeans and socks and T-shirts, leaving room for our shaving kits and a zippered bag we take on the road for condoms, lubricants, and the like. It felt odd to be preparing for sex in the midst of death, but utterly necessary. I drew the line at packing our latest toy: a glass-and-rubber penis pump we had ordered online. It had given us both a rollicking good time (somewhat to our surprise) but it looked like something out of a fifties mad-scientist movie and would almost certainly read as a terrorist device on an airport X-ray machine.

Ben still smelled sweetly of his workshop when he got home. He smooched me at the door without ceremony and headed straight for the shower. When he joined me in the bedroom, he kissed me again and put on a T-shirt and sweatpants.

"Is that what you're wearing on the plane?"

"It's a red-eye," he said with a shrug.

"You're right." I pulled off my jeans and grabbed sweatpants from the closet.

"We should pack the Ambien."

I patted my carry-on bag. "Gotcha."

"Will this be open-casket?" Ben asked.

"What?"

"Don't Southerners generally prefer open-casket funerals?"

"Not this one," I said with a wince, but it did make me think. "Of course. You're right. That's why she asked Patreese to 'pretty her up.' Not before but *after*."

My father's funeral had been closed-casket, to the obvious disappointment of some of the mourners, but now I could understand why Mama hadn't wanted one last chance to gaze at her husband's face—

prettied up or not. The loudest objection to Papa's closed casket had come from an aunt in Pensacola who'd sent the biggest wreath at the funeral. I still recall that monstrosity more vividly than anything else that day: a mass of white carnations surrounding a child's toy telephone. A glittered ribbon at the top said: JESUS CALLED. The one at the bottom said: AND HERB ANSWERED.

Herb, of course, had answered for nothing, but Mama had finally told the truth, and that made an open casket strangely appropriate. She could face the world without shame.

"Should we try to call her before we leave?" Ben asked as he packed his dressy black shoes.

I shook my head. "Irwin says she's really out of it—sleeping most of the time. They've got her on morphine. She's still adamant about staying off the respirator."

"She knows we're coming, though?"

"Oh, yeah."

Ben left the suitcase and pressed against my back, wrapping his arms around me.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sweetie, I'm fine. Why do you keep asking that?"

His cheek was against my shoulder blade. "Because you're not crying."

Ben knew better than anyone that I can cry at the drop of a hat. I had cried the night before when we were watching *Victor/Victoria* on Logo, the new queer channel. The movie came out the year Jon died, and I bought the album (remember albums?) just weeks after we buried his ashes at 28 Barbary Lane. I loved the song "You and Me," the sweet little soft-shoe number performed by Julie Andrews and Robert Preston. Those two are, in effect, playing a gay male couple, so the lyrics hit my heart dead center: "*We don't care that tomorrow comes with no guarantee, we've each other for company.*" Since then, of course, there have been thousands of tomorrows with no guarantees. Only now I saw Robert and Julie in a different light—as an *intergenerational* gay couple. I was no longer Victor, the *ingénue*; I was Toddy, the fussy "old queen with a head cold," who knows, in spite of everything, that he is loved.

"I'm not gonna cry about Mama," I said.

Ben tightened his grip on me.

“Does that sound awful?”

“No.”

“I’m sure she wants to go . . . but . . . that’s not the point. It’s just not in me anymore.”

“Some things are just too big, I guess.”

“Or too late,” I said.

Red-Eye

We took a cab to the airport to avoid a decision about parking—short-term or long-term?—and the implications of that. The security line was relatively hassle-free that late at night, so we made it to the gate without difficulty. But thanks to the annual cataclysm of our first rainfall, our flight was delayed for another hour and a half. The latest update from Orlovista suggested that time was of the essence, so I could feel my gut tightening on the spot. I called Irwin's voice mail and told him about the delay, assuring him that we were still on the way. Then we dragged our carry-ons to the newsstand and sought diversion.

The magazines we bought spoke volumes about both of us. I bought *People* (because I let myself do that in airports) and *Coastal Living* (because lately I've entertained fantasies about a place on the water—though I have no idea where the place, or even the water, would be). Ben bought *National Geographic* and *Yoga Journal* (because he has no idea how unwholesome his wholesomeness makes me feel). We buried ourselves in words and pictures for over an hour, remaining largely silent, both of us conscious of preserving our energy.

Ten minutes before boarding time I made a run to the bathroom. On my return Ben told me that my cell phone had rung. I dug it out of my bag. There was a brief message from Jake: "Hi, boss. I know you're in the air right now, but . . . gimme a call when you get this."

It was almost two a.m. but I called him back—certain I knew what he wanted.

He sounded tentative when he answered. "Hello?"

"They're in the red box by the front door," I told him.

"What?"

“The keys to the truck, right? I should’ve told you . . . I’m sorry.”

He seemed to be gasping for air. It took me a moment to realize he was crying.

“Jake . . . what is it?”

“Anna,” he said, strangling his sobs, “had a heart attack.”

I was looking directly at Ben now, who was obviously hearing everything. I knew what I had to ask Jake, but I found it impossible to speak.

“I guess you haven’t taken off,” Jake said.

“No . . . there was a . . . do you mean she’s—”

“She’s still alive, but she’s . . . not awake. Damn, boss. I figured you be long gone. I hate to lay this on you when—”

“Where are you?”

“St. Sebastian’s. Room 5ll.”

“We’ll be there.”

“But won’t that make you—”

“I’m glad you called, Jake . . . really.”

I closed the cell phone and looked at Ben. He was already gathering our stuff.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

But my legs wobbled pathetically as I tried to stand, so Ben grabbed my arm to keep me from toppling. Somehow he got me from there to the corner of a sports bar, where, for at least five minutes, in full view of the sports fans, I did the unimaginable and cried for my mother.

It was raining like all get-out by the time we reached St. Sebastian’s Hospital. The whole place was in sleep mode, and the hallways were all but deserted until we reached the one outside Anna’s room. Jake had thought to notify Brian, so he and Shawna were there—noticeably distraught—as well as Marguerite and Selina, the flatmates. Jake was at the end of the hallway, deep in conversation with a doctor. Marguerite was the first to spot us.

“Hi, guys.” She stood up and hurried over to embrace us, one at a time, briskly and equally, like the elementary schoolteacher she was. Short and partridge plump, she even *looked* like a schoolteacher that night. Or at least

a stereotypical one. Her brown hair was wrapped tight in a bun, and there was a cameo at the throat of her high-collared blouse.

“She’s stabilized,” she said quietly. “She’s in a coma . . . but she can still pull through, the doctor says, if she makes it through the next couple of days.”

I finally managed to speak. “When did it happen?”

“We’re not sure. She didn’t show up for poker, so Jake went down to check on her. She was already unconscious by then. Notch was lying by her side.”

Someone to sit in the sun with me. Who doesn’t want to go anywhere.

Marguerite leaned closer and spoke in a whisper. “Jake is kind of . . . punishing himself. He thinks he should’ve checked on her earlier. I guess he was working late.”

Mrs. Langston, I thought. Mrs. Langston and her fucking hedges.

“I’ll speak to him,” I said.

Brian and Shawna joined us. We didn’t hug—somehow it wasn’t the right thing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I told them.

Brian nodded. “You too.”

“Are we allowed to go in?” Ben asked.

“Sure,” said Shawna. “It just got kinda crowded in there.”

I nodded a greeting to Selina (Jake’s other flatmate, the investment counselor, a Korean-Canadian) as Ben and I entered the room. Selina returned the nod. I’d met her maybe three times at the most, but her total devotion to Anna was painfully apparent.

Anna was lying flat on the bed with her eyes closed, robbed of her usual color by a hospital gown and a respirator. I know you’re supposed to talk to people in comas, but I couldn’t, I just couldn’t. It wasn’t like Anna at all. There was nothing to connect with but the wheezing of the machinery and the grim drizzle of the rain against the window.

Don’t blame the rain, I told myself. Without it you wouldn’t even be here.

Back in the corridor, I had a few moments alone with Jake.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“A few hours. I dunno.”

"You looked exhausted. Why don't you go home?"

"I can't, boss."

"Yes, you can. We've got cell phones. I can take it from here."

"What am I gonna do at home?" (That pretty much answered my question about Connor.)

"The three of you should go," I told him. "Selina and Marguerite both look beat . . . and we're gonna have to do this in shifts. Get some rest and come relieve me later."

"But, what if—?"

"You've done everything right, Jake." I laid my arm across his shoulders. I knew he wouldn't start crying again. He was being a man about it.

"I was responsible for her," he said quietly.

"No, you weren't. She was. And that's the way she wanted it . . . *wants* it. There was no way in the world to know this would happen."

He seemed to get that I meant this.

"Ben and I were ready for a red-eye," I added, "so now we're just doing it somewhere else. Besides, somebody's gotta check on Notch."

This hadn't occurred to him. "Fuck," he said softly.

"There . . . you see?" I cajoled him with a look. "C'mon, sport. I just blew off my mother's death. Help me make it mean something."

He put his hand on my knee and shook it. "I'll check with the gals. Marguerite's got a class in the morning. She could use the sleep." He rose to his feet in full bear-cub mode.

"How were Mrs. Langston and her hedges?" I asked.

"A bitch," he replied.

I chuckled. "Same as it ever was."

"Hey . . . it's the job."

I was touched by the pride in his voice. He reminded me of me in my early days at the nursery.

Jake added, as an afterthought, "I bet even ol' Capability had to deal with some crabby old Lady Somebody-or-Other."

I'd recently told Jake about Capability Brown, the eighteenth-century landscape designer who persuaded the British aristocracy to tear out their formal gardens in favor of clumps of trees and free-form lakes. Jake, to my professorial delight, had adopted him as a hero.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling. “He probably did.”

He gave me a little salute.

“I’ll call you,” I said. “If there’s any change at all.”

An hour later, nothing had changed. Brian and Ben went out to scout for food, leaving Shawna and me alone. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt—and without her usual makeup—so she looked eerily young. I could still see the girl on Heart’s Desire Beach.

“Do you think she *knew*, Mouse?”

“What?”

“That this was gonna happen. Giving me her purse and all.”

I told her what Anna had said to me at the top of the de Young tower, explaining that I’d taken it largely as a sign of her general preparedness. “But she’s very intuitive, as you know. She knew the very moment her mother died—in Nevada.”

“Really?”

“And Edgar Halcyon, too.”

“Her big romance, you mean?”

I nodded. “We were all at her Christmas party on Barbary Lane . . . and she was out in the courtyard at one point . . . and she sort of . . . felt him leave.”

“She told you this?”

“Yeah. Not until much later, but . . . yeah.”

“That sounds more psychic than intuitive.”

“She wouldn’t call it that. It’s more like . . . a connectedness. She doesn’t talk to the dead or anything like that. She just feels it when . . . life ends.”

I’d struck a more somber note than I’d intended, and a shadow fell across Shawna’s face. I made a clumsy effort at changing the subject.

“When’s your book coming out? Have you heard from your publishers?”

She rolled her eyes. “The ass monkeys want me to change the ending.”

“Oh?”

“Can you believe that? I ended with a chapter on paraplegic sex . . . and they thought that was—get this—too downbeat.”

I told her, tactfully, I could sort of see their point.

“C’mon, Mouse . . . it’s totally hopeful in a book about sex. It means we all get a shot at getting laid. It’s about as upbeat as you can get.”

Her eyes were so dark and soulful without the distraction of makeup. Like Natalie Wood’s eyes (or Natalie Portman’s, if you must). I suddenly felt so blessed to have known her all these years. She was leaving me, too, I realized, and that would sting a little.

“So,” I told her, smiling, “tell the ass monkeys how you feel about it.”

“I have. Believe me.”

“What is it they say? The only difference between comedy and tragedy is where you end the story?”

“Who always says that?”

“I dunno. Somebody.” My heart grew leaden again. I sighed and gazed down the empty hallway toward the elevator. “Where will they find food this time of night?”

“Safeway, I think.”

“Ah.” I smiled at her rather pathetically. “You won’t have that problem in New York.”

“No . . . I guess not.”

A long silence.

“Should I be leaving?” she asked.

I took her hand. “It’s your dream, babycakes.”

“Yeah . . . but . . . I can write anywhere, and . . . Dad’s just . . . coming apart at the seams.”

“That’s not your problem. It’s not even about you.”

She blinked at me for a moment, apparently understanding, then turned her gaze back toward Anna’s room. Even from here you could hear the sighing of the respirator.

“This sucks so bad,” she said.

The guys brought us pizza—lukewarm and oily and curiously satisfying. The four of us consumed it tribally in a nook next to the nurses’ station.

Then Brian asked me: “Is this déjà vu for you?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “A little.”

“Why?” asked Ben.

“This is where Michael was laid up back in . . . ’77, was it?”

“It was one floor up, actually, but the view was the same.”

Shawna wiped her mouth, remembering the story. “The thing with the snooty-sounding name.”

“Guillain-Barré,” I said, smiling. I had come down with this esoteric syndrome literally overnight and had recovered in a matter of months. In between I was almost totally paralyzed. Jon—my lover, the gynecologist—was working at St. Sebastian’s at the time and would stop by on his rounds, bringing his Norse god face into my limited line of vision. Five years later AIDS would turn the tables. Jon died here in 1982, blind and terrified.

I knew not to go there now.

Ben’s face lit up. “Then this was where you came out!” (It’s amazing, really, how well Ben remembers my stories. I’m not nearly as good about remembering his.)

“What do you mean?” asked Shawna.

“He wrote his parents from here,” said Brian. “Told ’em he was gay.”

Shawna turned to me. “But you were paralyzed.”

“I dictated it.”

Brian laughed. We all did, in fact. But back then I’d thought I was going to die in this place. I thought the paralysis would reach my lungs and that would be it; there’d be no other chance to say who I was. I remember the butterfly kite that Anna hung on the wall across from my bed. And I remember the people around the bed the day I wrote the letter—Anna and Mona and Brian and Mary Ann—my “logical” family at 28 Barbary Lane.

“It was a fucking *long* letter, too,” I said, grinning. “Thank God Mary Ann knew shorthand.”

Her name hung in the air like an unanswered question.

Shawna avoided eye contact with her father by staring down at the pizza box. Ben shot a glance at me, then gazed into the distance. Brian cleared his throat and stood up.

“Too many sodas,” he said, heading off to the bathroom.

Once he was out of earshot, Shawna murmured, “Shit,” beneath her breath.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” said Ben.

Brian was gone for at least ten minutes. When he returned his face looked ravaged from crying. Standing, he addressed the three of us as a body.

“Sorry, guys.”

“No problem,” said Ben.

“We have to call her,” said Brian. “We can’t let this happen without her.”

Remembered Perfume

You try it sometime. You try finding a fifty-five-year-old housewife from Darien, Connecticut, whom you haven't talked to for years. That place is a hotbed of cautious white people. It's where they shot *The Stepford Wives*, you know. Both versions of it.

Mary Ann had given me her number on 9/11, but it hadn't worked since the invasion of Iraq. Shawna had a more recent number, but, typically, she'd mislaid it. My only option was to sweet-talk the nurse (he didn't require much) into letting me use his computer.

I tried Googling Mary Ann's husband to no avail. There was plenty of stuff about his former business—and even a mention of his wife—but no phone numbers, of course.

Then I remembered Mary Ann's stepson, the Explorer Scout whose troop ran Darien's ambulance service. Their website provided a phone number, so I called and got a recording: a croaky-voiced kid telling you to call 911 and not the Explorer post if this is "an actual emergency." I just wanted the Explorer post, so I left a message: "If anyone in the post knows Robbie Caruthers, please tell him to tell his stepmom that Anna Madrigal is . . . very ill. This is extremely important. Thank you very much. The number she should call is . . ."

The pizza made us sleepy, so we slept intermittently, slumped against one another outside Anna's room. In the pearly-gray hour before dawn I took my cell phone to another wing of the hospital and called Irwin at home in Orlando.

"Hey, bro," he said.

"Hope I'm not too early."

“Nah. Lenore’s up and fixin’ biscuits. You on the ground?”

“No . . . well, yeah, but . . . I’m still in San Francisco . . .”

. . . *three . . . two . . . one* . . .

“. . . I won’t be coming back, Irwin. My friend Anna has had a heart attack, and . . . I have to be with her. I’m sorry.”

A long silence, and then: “Mama’s got two days at the most, Mikey.”

“I know that, Irwin.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do, Irwin. Anna is family to me.”

“More than your mama?”

I took a breath and said it: “If I have to choose . . . yes.”

Irwin sighed audibly. “Your old landlady, right? The one with the—”

“Can she talk on the phone?”

“Who? Mama?”

“Yes.”

“No way.”

“Then I need you to help me, Irwin. I need you to tell Mama that I love her and I wish I could be there and . . . whatever she needs to hear . . . and I want you to tell her, if you haven’t already, that I’m glad she blabbed about Papa. Tell her: ‘Good for you, Mama.’ Tell her I’m proud of her. Tell her I’m glad she came out.”

“Okay. That’s awful long but—”

“How is Sumter doing around all this?”

“He’s holdin’ up. He’s a tough little soldier underneath.”

“I know,” I said, bristling at his implication. “He’s also a sweet gay kid who needs your support.”

“That’s not funny, Mikey.”

“I’m not trying—”

“How could you possibly know that, anyway?”

“How could you possibly *not* know it?”

Silence.

“No boot camps, Irwin. And no more snide remarks. That’s all I’m saying. Let him be who he is. Don’t deal with this the way Papa did.”

The invocation of our father brought even more silence, but I think I got through to him. I was holding the cards now; Irwin had no choice but to listen.

“Will you at least come for the funeral?” he asked.

“Depends on how soon it happens, I guess.”

“It won’t look right if you don’t.”

“I don’t care how it looks.”

“Right.”

“I’ll try to be there, though. I really will.”

I could picture myself at a funeral ceremony—two, three, maybe four days hence—but it wasn’t being held at a memorial park in Orlando. I was climbing the wooden stairway at the entrance to Barbary Lane, holding tight to Anna’s favorite vase (the Chinese ginger jar she kept on her dresser). There were at least a half-dozen people with me, so we would have to make it simple and quick. The house had been severely remodeled and was a single-family dwelling these days—a young developer and his PR woman wife, both chums of Governor Schwarzenegger. I knew they wouldn’t cotton to the notion of a foreign substance being sprinkled in their garden.

“I hope we’ll see you,” said Irwin.

“I hope so, too,” I replied.

Shortly after ten that morning, Jake and Selina showed up to relieve the watch. Brian and Shawna headed off in their separate directions, and Ben and I went home. Anna’s condition had remained unchanged, and I was grateful, frankly, to get the smell of the hospital out of my head. I was beginning to feel a familiar tightening in my chest—a function of my meds, probably, or anxiety, or a combination of the two. It happens sometimes, I don’t know why. I was ready to breathe some clean morning air and take a shower and stretch out on the bed for a few hours. Ben was, too.

It felt odd hauling our luggage back into the house. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since we’d packed those bags. After showering, we unpacked just enough to brush our teeth, then crawled under clean sheets together.

“What would I do if you weren’t here?”

“You’d manage,” Ben said, smiling. He was straddling my leg like a koala climbing a tree. He’s only an inch shorter than me but he feels much smaller in bed. The weight difference has something to do with that (I’m

not in denial here), but it's also about the sense of purpose I feel when we're together. I feel like his protector.

"My daddy," he said with a sigh. "My man." (He often adds the man part to the daddy part, for fear, I guess, that I'll find him too hung up on roles. He needn't worry. I love being his daddy—it seems to be the role I was born for.)

"You've been so patient," I told him.

"About what?"

"All this death and dying shit. You didn't sign on for that."

"I didn't sign on at all. I was drafted. And she made you do it, thank God."

He meant Anna, of course—the way she'd brought us together at the Caffè Sport.

I smiled. "We owe her one, don't we?"

"More than one, I'd say."

We lay quiet for a while. A light drizzle was shellacking the leaves in the garden. I felt the warm rise and fall of Ben's chest against my side.

This is my harbor, I thought. This is where I've been heading all along.

He stroked my arm deliberately, as if about to say something, but changed his mind.

"What, sweetie?"

"I was just wondering . . . say, assuming she doesn't come out of the coma . . ."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what we'd do."

"Do you know what she'd want?"

I swallowed hard. "Probably . . . yes."

"Same as your mother?"

I couldn't answer that directly. "The doctor said it sometimes takes three or four days for them to come out of it."

"Sure." He patted my stomach as if to say that he'd leave that alone for now. "Let's get some sleep."

I slept solidly for a little over four hours. I was awakened by my cell phone—an unidentified caller.

"Hello." My voice was still froggy with sleep.

"I'm sorry," said the caller. "I'm not sure who I am calling. This is Mary Ann Caruthers from Darien, Connecticut."

I noticed, perversely, that she pronounced the town's name the way I've been told the locals do: Dairy Ann. Mary Ann from Dairy Ann. Singleton no more.

"Hey," I said evenly. "It's Michael."

"Oh . . . Michael . . . hi."

"Hi."

Pleasant but stiff, both of us. Like the day we'd met back in 1976. She'd just found the man of her dreams at the Marina Safeway only to discover that he was there with the man of *his* dreams—me. What else could we be but pleasant and stiff?

"One of the posties just called me at Pilates."

"I'm sorry . . . What?"

"The Explorer Post. The place you called?"

"Right. Of course."

"She dates my stepson, Robbie, so . . ." She caught her breath, stopped herself. "It was something about Mrs. Madrigal?"

She sounded so young at that moment, framing the difficult as a hopeful question. Those of us who'd grown old with Anna had dropped the "Mrs." years ago. Mary Ann had to summon a younger version of herself to function in this moment.

"She had a heart attack," I said. "She's in a coma."

"Fuck." She spoke the word softly, like an Episcopal prayer.

"We couldn't *not* tell you."

"No . . . thank you. Thank you for that."

"Brian asked me to call you. Brian and Shawna." (I wanted her to know this; she had to be wondering.)

"Is she likely to . . ."

"We don't know. She's just . . . you know, sleeping."

A long silence, and then: "She didn't ask for me, did she?"

"No . . . it happened pretty quick." I had a terrible sinking feeling. Why had I even bothered with this? "You don't have to be here or anything . . . we just wanted you to know."

"I appreciate the effort, Michael."

"Hey," I said, a little too brightly. "Thank the Explorers."

“I’ll be at the Four Seasons. I’ll call you when I get in.”

I really didn’t get what she meant. “The Four Seasons where?”

“The Four Seasons there.”

“You were already planning to come?”

“No,” she replied, “but . . . my husband has a plane.”

That slight hesitation redeemed her; she had the good taste to be embarrassed.

Ben and I were slated for the night watch at the hospital, so we decided to take a walk down at Crissy Field. The rain had stopped by early afternoon, but there were a few sodden clouds loitering above the bay. We followed the path through the marshes and inlets that had been—not that long ago—a derelict military airstrip. Now there were herons and sandy beaches and children romping at the water’s edge. A new ecosystem was forming where once there had only been asphalt.

We sat on a bench, holding hands, gazing out at the kindly blue of the bay. There were sailboats even today, a rainbow of sails catching the fickle wind. I remembered what Anna had said about bringing Sumter here and realized how right she had been. *I will do that, I promised her, no matter what happens. I will sit here and show him this miracle and tell him he’s loved for exactly the boy he’s becoming.*

The wind shifted and blew toward us, sweet with rain and the sagey smell of the wetlands. It seemed to blow *through* me, in fact, soothing every cell in my body. It was like that moment in *Poltergeist* when JoBeth Williams feels the spirit of her daughter passing through her. “I can smell her,” she says, laughing with relief, and that’s just how it was with me. Not a remembered perfume or even the scent of her skin, but her essence, a condensation of her spirit. She was passing through me like sunlight through water, on her way to somewhere else. I looked at my watch.

“Should we be going?” asked Ben.

“I think so,” I told him.

Ben was driving the Prius up Noe Hill when the call came. I remember looking at Carlotta’s navigational map and seeing the Home icon appear on the screen.

Perfect, I thought. Perfect.

And the perfect messenger was bringing the news.

“Patreese,” I said quietly.

“Wassup, my brother?” (Shawna says that, too, sometimes, but I’ve never gotten used to it. A greeting offered as a question seems to lay the burden on the person being called, when the caller, by all rights, should be telling *you* what’s up.)

“Hangin’ in there,” I said.

“Listen, Michael—”

“It’s Mama, right?”

“Yeah. She passed about twenty minutes ago. I was talkin’ to Mohammed and saw your folks come in. I hope you don’t mind hearin’ it from me first.”

“I’d rather it be you,” I told him.

Ben looked over at me and laid his hand on my leg.

“She went peaceful,” said Patreese. “I was workin’ on her this morning, and she was . . . you know . . . fixin’ to leave already.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

“She wanted you to have something. You at your computer?”

“I will be in a little while.”

“Check your email, my man.”

Ten minutes later I did that. It was a photograph of Mama and Patreese, both grinning like kids at a prom as they posed for the camera. Patreese was sitting on her bed in a red T-shirt, his big mahogany arm lying gently on her frail shoulders.

Mama was holding the photograph of me and Ben at Big Sur.

Gibberish

Mary Ann hadn't changed dramatically since the days of her adjustable-bed commercials. You could still see that person, at any rate. She was just as slim, just as naturally elegant as the mid-forties version of herself. Her hair was the big difference; short and silvery and feathered against her well-shaped head in Judi Dench fashion. As she sat on my sofa that morning, looking pretty in slacks and a sea-foam silk blouse, I wondered if the new hairdo had been the result of boredom or chemotherapy. That's just how I think these days. Catastrophes are to be expected.

She seemed to read my mind. "Was it a mistake?" she asked, touching the side of her head. "It's fairly new."

"I like it," I said.

"I'm not so sure." She rolled her eyes in self-punishment. "Why am I talking about my hair?"

"Nerves," I said, smiling. "In a minute I'll be talking about mine."

She smiled back. "You really do look good, Michael."

"Thanks," I said, shifting my extra weight in my Morris chair. She didn't call me Mouse, I noticed. The name was an artifact now, part of who we used to be.

"Where are Brian and Shawna?" she asked.

"They're already at Anna's. I told them we'd meet them there."

"Great . . . she's home now, then?"

"Oh . . . no . . . I meant the hospital, actually." I paused for a moment, choosing my words. "You should know . . . she's still not awake. She may never be."

Mary Ann nodded. "I understand."

I had just begun to face this myself, but I'd already resolved, after lengthy discussions with Brian and Marguerite, to help create the sort of send-off that Anna would want: one without panic or regret or excessive sadness on the part of the survivors. We had that opportunity, after all. We had to make the most of it.

"I hope I didn't put you on the spot," I told Mary Ann. "Brian asked me to call you, but, frankly, I wasn't sure if I even had the right to—"

"No. He was absolutely right. I'm glad you called." She looked around the living room, taking it in. "This place just gets cozier and cozier."

"Thanks. Eighteen years will do that."

"And Thack's . . . not around anymore?"

I shook my head. "He took off ten years ago."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I mean . . . it was awful at the time, but it brought me to where I am now. If you know what I mean,"

"I do . . . actually." As she fiddled with the piping on the slipcover I could see that her hands were the only place where her age was evident. I've noticed this about myself as well. We can fool ourselves about our changing faces, but our hands creep up on us. One day we look down at them and realize they belong to our grandparents.

"Still," she said, "you guys seemed happy. I was a little bit envious, to tell you the truth."

"It *was* good," I told her. "For a few years, at any rate. He just got more and more angry."

"At you, you mean?"

"At the world mostly . . . but I was there. I had to live with it. You remember how he was sometimes. It just got worse."

Mary Ann smiled in remembrance. "You called him your little Shiite."

"Well, that's what you do, don't you? Put a cute name on the shit that really bothers you . . . so it looks like you knew what you were getting."

"You're right," she said ruefully. I wondered if she was thinking of Brian (hadn't she called him Mr. Mellow?) or the current husband, the retired CEO who flies his own jet and wears patchwork madras. She was clearly thinking of *someone*.

"The thing is," I said, "Thack did me a favor by leaving. I might never have noticed how little I was getting if he hadn't taken it away."

She nodded slowly, arranging her hands carefully in her lap. "So . . . you're single these days?"

I did something I've never done with another living soul: I held up my left hand and wiggled my wedding band at her. The gesture was straight out of Cleveland, tailor-made for Mary Ann. Or at least the Mary Ann I used to know.

She cooed appreciatively. "You went the whole route, eh?"

I nodded. "Down at City Hall."

She smiled. "I thought about you when that happened."

"Same here. I wanted you to meet him."

"Really?" She widened her eyes. "So where is he?"

"Down at the hospital with the others."

"How sweet that he cares about her so much."

I went to the mantel and grabbed the Big Sur photo—the same shot I'd sent to my mother. "His name is Benjamin McKenna."

"Well," she said, perusing the photo, "he's adorable."

"Yeah."

"And young."

I nodded solemnly. "He was in the Explorers with your stepson. That's how I found you."

Her mouth went completely oval—like little Shirley Temple.

"Kidding," I assured her.

"Oh, God . . . Mouse." She giggled like the girl I used to know. "Why do you do that to me?"

"I dunno," I said. "You've just always been so . . . easy. Where's yours, by the way?"

"Where's my what?"

"Husband."

"Oh . . . back in the hotel. He's having a gym day."

"Well, that's good . . . I mean, a good thing to do."

"He's kind of a . . . you know . . . straight-ahead guy, but . . . I'm really happy with him, Mouse."

I nodded. "You seem to be."

"And guess what . . . we were married the same week you were."

Now *I* was the one playing Shirley Temple. "How did you know when Ben and I were . . . ? Oh, right . . . the news."

“Isn’t that amazing? It’s not like we could have planned it.”

“No . . . you’re right. We couldn’t have.”

There was a melancholy note in my reply, but she didn’t seem to notice. She just kept chattering away cheerfully—almost hysterically.

“And Robbie is the sweetest kid. He’s already certified as an EMT, and he’ll be driving the ambulance next year. And I like being a mom, you know . . . even at this advanced age. There’s something wonderful about passing on what you know to someone younger . . . even if it’s dumb stuff they have no use for whatsoever.”

As you might imagine, I was thinking of Ben now, but Mary Ann was already in the process of shifting gears. “I know you all hated me after I left . . . and you had every right to, Mouse, but I just couldn’t keep—”

“Look, Mary Ann, there’s no point in—”

“Yes there is. There *is* a point. Brian and I weren’t right for each other, and both of us knew it, and . . . I couldn’t keep pretending that everything was fine. I made it about my career . . . and to some extent it was . . . but I just couldn’t do it anymore. And I knew he’d always have Shawna. I knew he wouldn’t be alone.”

“He hasn’t been,” I said quietly.

“And there was something else I couldn’t admit . . . even to myself: you were gonna die, Mouse, and I couldn’t . . . this is so awful. . . .” She was pressing her fingertips under her eyes, the way well-bred ladies do to stop their tears. “I couldn’t bear the thought of watching you die the way Jon did. I couldn’t do that again. Not with you, Mouse. I couldn’t bear the thought of . . . that horror.”

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “I didn’t much care for it myself.”

Her laughter came in a short violent burst, and that set free her tears. I rose from my chair and joined her on the sofa, collecting her in my arms while she sobbed. She felt so tiny there and her hair smelled clean and lemony.

“Get it out,” I told her. “We’ve got a celebration to attend.”

It helped that we were all there for Anna. Brian and Shawna (and Mary Ann, for that matter) were largely relieved of the problem of finding something meaningful to say at their reunion. The afternoon was strictly about Anna, so there was only a brief exchange of hugs in the lobby and a

heartbreaking moment—well, heartbreaking to me—when, on our way down the hallway, Mary Ann touched Shawna’s back and complimented her on her black onyx earrings. Brian, for the most part, remained stoic throughout, handling the other introductions—Ben and Jake and the flatmates—with surprising grace. He could pull it together when he wanted to.

Marguerite, as usual, provided the update:

“She’s off the respirator,” she told us.

I knew what that had meant in my mother’s case, so I wasn’t sure how to react. Was there cause for celebration or . . . cause for another type of celebration?

“What does that mean?” asked Shawna.

“She woke up briefly this morning and just yanked it off when the doctors weren’t here. She’s been sleeping without it.”

I was frowning now. “And the doctors said that’s okay?”

“Absolutely,” said Selina. “Her vital signs are definitely improving.” It was the longest phrase I’d heard her speak since Anna had been at the hospital, but there was something about her certainty that sounded wishful and forced.

“Is she able to talk?” asked Mary Ann.

“Just in her sleep,” said Jake. “It’s not makin’ a lotta sense.”

“Like what?” asked Brian.

“You know,” said Selina, obviously putting on a brave face. “The way anybody sounds when they talk in their sleep.”

Mary Ann nodded soberly, casting her eyes at Brian and Shawna.

Ben moved next to me and slipped his arm around my waist with a small but significant smile. He seemed to be telling me that we weren’t out of the woods yet.

Brain damage is what I was thinking.

All seven of us were in Anna’s room now. Her bed was no longer flat, but she was fast asleep. Someone—Selina or Marguerite, I presume—had made a gallant effort at making her presentable, fluffing her hair and adding color to her cheeks. Anna’s eyes were closed but fluttering as she murmured unintelligibly. Brian, as already agreed upon, stood next to her and did all the talking—at least initially.

“Anna . . . if you can hear me . . . everyone’s here now.”

He’s being the man of the family, I thought.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to wake up. We’re just here to tell you how much we love you and appreciate everything you’ve—”

He was interrupted by a groan from Anna, twitching in her sleep.

“—everything you’ve done for us.”

“Mona?” Anna murmured. “Is that you?”

My heart caught in my throat as Brian gazed toward me for guidance. I shook my head, telling him not to go there. Mary Ann caught this interaction and grimaced in confusion. *She doesn’t know*, I thought. *We never even got to that.*

“It’s Brian, Anna . . . and Mary Ann’s here, too. She flew in all the way from Connecticut just to see you. And Selina and Marguerite are here. They’re responsible for the beautiful red satin pajamas you’re wearing. And Ben and Michael, of course, and Shawna, who’s moving to New York next week to—”

Another moan from Anna, this one louder, more guttural.

“—to become the world’s best writer. Or at least the next Susie Bright, right? And we’re all very proud of her . . .”

Shawna leaned over and whispered, “Maybe this isn’t a good idea.”

Selina, I noticed, was already slipping out of the room, apparently shaken by Anna’s failure to respond to Brian’s wedding-reception-MC approach. Marguerite followed, whispering reassurances to her friend. Anna, meanwhile, was speaking again, her eyes still closed, her words slurred and cryptic.

“What’s she saying?” asked Mary Ann.

Brian leaned closer. Anna’s lips were moving, but I couldn’t hear much of anything from where I was standing.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” said Brian. “It’s gibberish.”

“Like what?” said Shawna.

“It sounded like ‘There is no . . . fisted nation.’”

“Fisted nation?” said Jake, wrinkling his nose.

Anna spoke again, apparently repeating herself, so Brian moved his ear closer to her mouth. “No,” he said, looking up at us, “it’s ‘fifth destination.’” She said, “There is no fifth destination.”

It took a moment, but it hit me hard. “Oh my God.”

“What?” asked Mary Ann. “What does that mean?”

I was looking at Ben now, flabbergasted. “It’s what Carlotta says.”

“Who’s Carlotta?” asked Brian.

“Our car,” said Ben.

Mary Ann frowned. “Your car says things?”

I was still gaping at Ben, looking for the deeper meaning of this conundrum, this snake eating its tail. I remembered what Ben had said when we first heard Carlotta’s stern pronouncement on the fifth destination: *If that’s the answer, what is the question?* And here was Mrs. Madrigal, drifting in dreams between life and death, mumbling this phrase we’d already mocked and lovingly made our own.

Is this how she would leave, winking at us across the cosmos?

“This is the weirdest thing,” I said. “I can’t begin to imagine how—”

“I told her, honey.” Ben was smiling gently, having burst my metaphysical bubble. “After the hula show at the Palace. We had a good laugh about it.”

“Right,” said Shawna. “She was vaporizing that night.”

“God,” said Mary Ann, “will somebody please speak English?”

The patient cleared her throat noisily. All eyes turned to the bed as Anna’s eyes fluttered open. She took us in, one at a time, with a smile blooming on her face.

“Children,” she said weakly.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Mary Ann. “We’re here.”

“You’ll never guess . . .” Anna’s voice trailed off.

“What?” I asked. “Never guess what?”

“Where I’ve been,” she replied.

This Day Alone

On the day before Thanksgiving there were already fat red berries on the holly bush at the foot of our garden. Ben and I were stretched out on our double chaise beneath a blue enamel sky, discussing our contribution to Anna's annual feast.

"What about blackberry cobbler?" I suggested.

Ben shook his head. "Brian's doing dessert. And we'll be eating it . . . by the way . . . in the Winnebago."

"You're shitting me."

"He's parking it across the street from Anna's. Says he wants our vibes in there before he leaves for Mesa Verde."

I thought for a moment. "Okay, then . . . sweet potatoes."

"Kinda boring," said Ben. "And we did that last year."

"Did we?" I had no memory of that whatsoever.

Ben smiled at me indulgently.

"Hey," I said, "some guys my age can't remember the seventies. You're getting off real easy with sweet potatoes." (Faulty memory aside, I love the fact that we're starting to repeat ourselves, settling into comfy familial rituals.)

"What about a green bean casserole?" Ben offered.

"No, wait! The brussels sprouts with maple syrup! Nobody's had that one, for sure."

"There's a reason for that," said Ben.

"Okay. Fine."

Ben leaned into me, nuzzling my neck. "Don't be hurt, honey. It was a noble effort." He threaded his fingers through mine as we gazed up at the perfect cerulean sky. "Hey . . . the nipple toys have arrived from eBay."

“And the swallows have come back to Capistrano.”

He laughed. “You’re gonna love ’em.”

“They’re from eBay? They’re *used* nipple toys?”

“C’mon.” Ben tugged my nipple through my polo shirt. “That would run you a whole lot more.”

I chuckled. “You’re right. There’s probably heavy bidding on celebrity nipple toys.”

“Speaking of which,” said Ben. “Shawna’s gonna be on *The Daily Show* next week.”

I laughed sourly. “Nice segue.”

“Isn’t that great, though? She called all excited while you were in the shower. From a bar in Chelsea. She’s asked Mary Ann to be in the audience.”

I felt a tinge of jealousy, I have to admit. “Has she even seen Shawna’s website?”

“I would presume. Or she’s boning up on it as we speak.”

“It’s her husband who’s boning up on it.”

Ben scolded me with a smile. “Don’t be a fussy old uncle.”

We lay there silently, watching a pair of ravens circle the old cypress in a neighbor’s yard. Ben says that ravens mate for life, so it’s always nice when they offer us their blessing. Looking at them, Ben gave my belly a Buddha rub, a gesture that still makes me self-conscious, as much as I love being loved in my entirety.

“You know what I’d like to do today?” he said.

“What?”

“I’d like you to take me to Barbary Lane.”

“There’s nothing to see, sweetie. There must be three planks left from the old house.”

“I just wanna see the lane. It’s a perfect day for it, and I’ve never even climbed those steps.”

“Okay, then . . . sure. We can eat lunch in North Beach.”

“Should we take Anna with us?”

I shook my head. “The steps are too much for her. And she says she’d rather remember it the way it was.”

Ben took that in for a moment. “They’re the same steps, though, right?”

“Actually, no. They replaced them just after I left.”

“Oh.”

“They look the same, though. They’re almost as rickety now.”

As I spoke these words I was gazing at the old cypress. It was over a century old and its limbs were elaborately trussed with steel cables to keep them from snapping in a high wind. Like a lot of the cypresses in Golden Gate Park, this one was nearing the end of its cycle. (I confess that I sometimes make bets with it as to which one of us will outlast the other, which one will remain king of the hill.)

I looked over at my husband and reminded myself for the umpteenth time that his youth was not contagious. It would certainly make the journey more pleasant, but it wouldn’t save me from my destination. He had once offered me thirty years, but I’d happily settle for twenty. Hell, this day alone was enough for now.

And more than I’d ever expected.

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Mary Ann in Autumn

Dedication

For Laura Linney

Epigraph

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

—T. S. ELIOT

Single-Family Dwelling

There should be a rabbit hole was what she was thinking. There should be something about this hillside, some lingering sense memory—the view of Alcatraz, say, or the foghorns or the mossy smell of the planks beneath her feet—that would lead her back to her lost wonderland. Everything around her was familiar but somehow foreign to her own experience, like a place she had seen in a movie but had never actually visited. She had climbed these weathered steps—what?—thousands of times before, but there wasn't a hint of homecoming, nothing to take her back to where she used to be.

The past doesn't catch up with us, she thought. It escapes from us.

At the landing she stopped to catch her breath. Beneath her, the street intersecting with Barbary Lane tilted dizzily toward the bay, a collision of perspectives, like one of those wonky Escher prints that were everywhere in the seventies. The bay was bright blue today, the hard fierce blue of a gas flame. If there was fog rolling in—and there must be, given the insistence of those horns—she couldn't see it from here.

When she reached the path at the top of the steps, one of her heels got stuck in the paving stones. Yanking it free with a grunt, she chided herself for not leaving her Ferragamos back at the Four Seasons. Those stones, if memory served, had been used as ballast on the sailing ships that came around the horn—or so her landlady Mrs. Madrigal had claimed, once upon a time. Twenty years later the chunky granite blocks looked suspiciously ordinary, like the pavers in her driveway back in Connecticut.

As soon as she caught sight of the lych-gate at Number 28, a flock of wild parrots swooped low over the lane, cackling like crones. Those birds—or ones just like them—had been here when she was here, long before they became global celebrities in a popular documentary. She remembered how

proud she had felt when she saw that film in Darien, and how utterly irrational that feeling had been, as if she were claiming intimacy with someone she had known slightly in high school who had grown up to be famous.

Those birds did not belong to her anymore.

The lych-gate was the same, only new. The redwood shingles on its roof had been crumbly with dry rot when she moved to the East Coast in the late eighties. Now they were made of slate—or a good imitation thereof. The gate itself, once creaky but welcoming, had been fitted with a lock and a buzzer and something under the eaves that looked like a security camera. So much for a quick snoop around the garden.

She peered through a hole in the lattice at what she could see of the house. The shingle siding had been replaced, and fairly recently. The trim around the windows was painted a hard, glossy black. There were now French doors opening onto the courtyard in roughly the spot where Mrs. Madrigal's front door had been. (Had anyone even thought to save that door with its wonderful stained-glass panels?) Most of the outside stairways, she noticed with a shiver, had been removed or modified to serve the transformation of an apartment house into—what was the official term?—a Single-Family Dwelling.

We had been a family, she thought. Even in our separate dwellings.

From this angle, of course, she couldn't see the little house on the roof, the funky matchbox studio Mrs. Madrigal's tenants had referred to as "the pentshack." Her guess was it no longer existed, given the extensive nature of this remodeling. It had probably been replaced by a deck—or another floor entirely—and she wasn't sure how to feel about that. Her memories of the place held both dread and delight.

Two blocks away, while looking for lunch, she found the corner mom-and-pop still intact, still called the Searchlight Market. Next door her old Laundromat had been stylishly renovated and a little too cutely renamed "The Missing Sock." It pleased her to find the original thirties' lettering still silvering the plate glass at Woo's Cleaners, though the place was obviously empty. The windows were blocked by pale blue wrapping paper, the very paper her laundry had once been wrapped in. Across the street, a pristine gallery of tiny *objets* had sprouted next to what had once been Marcel &

Henri, the butcher shop where she had sometimes splurged on pâté, just to keep from *feeling* like a secretary.

And there was Swensen's, the ice cream shop at Hyde and Union that had been her consolation on more than one Saturday night when she had stayed in with Mary Tyler Moore. This was the original Swensen's, the one Mr. Swensen himself had opened in the late forties, and he had still been running it when she was here. She was about to stop in for a cone, just for old times' sake, when she spotted the fire trucks parked on Union.

Rounding the corner, she found dozens of onlookers assembled beneath a big sooty hole on the second floor of a house. The crisis seemed to have passed; the air was pungent with the smell of wet embers, and the firemen, though obviously weary, were business-as-usual as they tugged at a serpentine tangle of hoses. One of the younger ones, a frisky Prince Harry redhead, seemed aware of his lingering audience and played to the balcony with every manly move.

We do love our firefighters, she thought, though she had long ago forfeited her right to the Municipal We. She was no more a San Franciscan now than the doughy woman in a SUPPORT OUR TROOPS sweatshirt climbing off the cable car at the intersection. She herself hadn't used a cable car for years, yet every handrail and plank was as vividly familiar as her first bicycle. This one had a light blue panel along the side, marking it as a Bicentennial model. They were built the year she'd arrived in the city.

She waited for the cable car to pass, considering something that eventually sent her into Swensen's to address the middle-aged white man behind the counter.

"I used to order something here," she said, as winsomely as possible, "but I can't remember the name of it. It was thirty years ago, so you may not . . ."

"Swiss Orange Chip."

"Excuse me?"

"Chocolate with orange bits, right?"

"Yes!"

"That's Swiss Orange Chip."

She gaped at him. "How on earth did you do that?"

He shrugged. "It's the flavor people can never remember the name of."

“Oh . . . right.” She gave him a curdled smile, feeling irredeemably average. “It’s really good, at any rate.”

He made her a sugar cone with a single scoop. Without tasting it, she carried it half a block to Russell Street, the little alley off Hyde where Jack Kerouac had been holed up for six months in the early fifties, working on a draft of *On the Road*. Her first husband, Brian, had brought her here when they started dating, since the place held great significance for him. Standing before the A-frame cottage like a pilgrim at Lourdes, he had told her only that Neal Cassady had lived there, and she, God help her Cleveland soul, had asked if that was one of David Cassidy’s brothers. He was gentle about it at the time—he wanted to get laid, after all—but he wouldn’t let her forget it for years. Had she paid more attention to that moment and what it said about both of them, she might have saved them from a marriage that was pretty much doomed from the start.

Now, according to the daughter they had adopted, Brian was out living his own version of *On the Road*, driving his beloved Winnebago from one national park to another, apparently more at ease with life than he had ever been. He was seven years older than she, which made him sixty-four now, an age that could only be darkly ironic to a boomer who was finally facing it. *Will you still need me? Will you still feed me?*

Leaving the Cassady cottage, she headed down the street with her ice cream, finally reuniting with the dark citrus tang of Swiss Orange Chip. The taste of it, as she had suspected, swept her back on a tide of subliminal memory to a much younger self.

It was the taste of a lonely Saturday night.

Back at the Searchlight she bought a turkey sandwich and ate it by the tennis courts in the leafy little park at the crest of Russian Hill. For a moment she considered taking the cable car to the Wharf for an Irish coffee at the Buena Vista, but that would only delay the deeply unpleasant mission at hand. She had told Mouse she’d explain everything as soon as she hit town, and since she’d been sobbing the last time they talked, postponement was no longer an option. But how she dreaded putting it into words.

She dug her iPhone out of her shoulder bag and dialed his number. It rang six or seven times before he picked up: “Mary Ann?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank God. I was starting to worry.”

“Sorry . . . I just needed . . .” She let the thought trail off. She had no earthly idea what she had needed.

“Are you at the Four Seasons?”

“No. Russian Hill.”

“Why’d you go there?”

“I don’t know. Dumb idea.”

“Do you wanna come here?”

“You’re at home?”

“Yeah. Ben’s at the dog park. We’ll have the place to ourselves.”

That was something of a relief. Ben was a lovely guy, but what she had to say would be hard enough to share with *one* person.

The Politics of the Park

The dog park was a fenced-in parcel of packed sand next to the Eureka Valley Recreation Center on Collingwood Street. When Ben reached the gate, Roman was already straining on his leash in anticipation of the free-for-all awaiting him. There were at least a dozen dogs today, among them two of Roman's favorites: a frisky ridgeback named Brokeback and a Portuguese water dog who, except for a smudge of white on his chest, was almost Roman's double. Ben often had to explain to strangers that Roman wasn't a Portie but a black Labradoodle, one of a growing number of poodle hybrids (golden doodles, schnoodles, even Saint Berdoodles) to be found around the Castro these days. But he hated it when people called them "designer dogs." He liked to think of Roman as a mutt—a term the president-elect had recently used to describe himself.

Ben found something reassuring in the anonymous fellowship of the dog park. Most of the people who brought their dogs here didn't know each other on the outside, yet he had seen them hug each other when someone left for vacation. Their offhanded intimacy defied boundaries of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and—every now and then—mental health. And even the serious crazies somehow seemed less so when immersed in the loving lunacy of dogs. It was a temporary cure for everything.

Ben sat down on a bench that would not have looked out of place in a formal English garden. There were half a dozen of these along the perimeter fence, the result of a beautification effort led by Sister Chastity Boner, a dog-loving member of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Winter had been a long time coming this year—not to mention the rain—so he settled against the bench and gorged on the remains of autumn. There was a bolster of fog already rolling over Twin Peaks, but it had yet to smother the sun.

The abstract mural on the south wall of the rec center was still ablaze with color, and the frolicking dogs were still casting long shadows on the sand.

A heavysset old man in a navy blue parka sat down next to Ben on the bench. "Roman's had a haircut," he said.

Ben nodded sheepishly. "We let him get too rasta. The groomer had to take him down a lot more than usual."

"Looks good," said the old man. "Very sporty."

"Thanks, Cliff." He knew the guy's name because Cliff was often here with his dog, a shivery little piebald terrier named Blossom, who, for some peculiar reason, fascinated Roman more than most of the other dogs in the park. "I think he's a little embarrassed about the haircut," Ben added. "He'd rather be shaggy."

"Aw, look. He's forgiven you already."

Roman had his nose wedged in Blossom's butt.

"That's what I like about 'em," said Cliff. "They get on with things and don't hold a grudge. They don't dwell on the past."

"No, I know. He ate my Sonicare this morning and hasn't given it a second thought."

"Your what?"

"My electric toothbrush."

The old man smiled, exposing a row of teeth that could have used a toothbrush some time ago. "Our unit had a dog in 'Nam. Little brown mutt the mamasan brought to our hooch one day. Plannin' on eatin' it, I guess. Sweet little guy. We made him our mascot for a coupla months, until they transferred us."

"What do you think happened to him?"

"I *know* what happened to him. Chief petty officer shot him."

"Shit."

"Had to. We couldn't take him with us. He woulda starved. Or got eaten."

Ben sighed. "I guess so."

"Did you notice our latest addition?" Cliff asked.

Ben followed the old man's wobbly finger to a glossy red fire hydrant sitting squarely in the middle of the sandy plain. "What's it doing there?"

Cliff shrugged. "For the dogs to pee on, I guess."

"It's a joke then."

“Maybe, but it’s a real fire hydrant. Bolted right into the ground. It was here when I came in this morning.”

“It’s fucking dangerous,” said a woman who’d been eavesdropping on their conversation. She was roughly Ben’s age—certainly no older than forty—with garish Amy Winehouse eye makeup to compensate for her skeletal Amy Winehouse limbs. “Karma is clinically blind, you know. She could knock the shit out of herself.”

Ben didn’t know which of these dogs was Karma, but he saw the woman’s point. The hydrant was an immovable iron stump, and these dogs yielded to nothing once they got going. Why compromise their safety for some kitschy human effort at witticism?

“Anybody know who did it?” Ben asked.

“Not me,” said Cliff, almost as though he were a grade-schooler who’d been asked to snitch on a friend. Cliff kept his profile low when it came to the politics of the park. He was friendly enough, but usually limited his talk to the dogs themselves, avoiding all discussion of their owners. Ben sometimes thought of him as “Mr. Cellophane” from *Chicago*. *’Cause you can look right through me, walk right by me, and never know I’m there.*

“I have my suspicions,” said Amy Winehouse, persisting in her investigation of the Great Fire Hydrant Mystery. Now she was aiming her caked turquoise lids toward a cluster of dog owners chatting in the middle of the park.

The group included a chubby Asian teenager, a middle-aged white woman in an Obama sweatshirt and a pair of look-alike ginger bears dispensing treats to their Jack Russell. Ben felt a peculiar sympathy for the culprit, whoever it was. He (or she or they) must have believed that the others would be deeply amused by the fire hydrant.

But this was the wrong crowd to be second-guessing. The hardcore regulars saw the park as an extension of their homes, fiercely debating every change that came along. When, for instance, the new redwood planters were installed along the fence, there were those who fretted that smaller dogs might get cornered there by the larger ones. The exact distance between the planters and the fence was a subject of grave deliberation for weeks. Ditto the contents of the planters, since some of the prettiest flowering trees dropped blossoms that were potentially poisonous. (“But only if eaten in large quantities or boiled into a tea,” Ben’s husband had

explained—and Michael, after all, was a gardener. “There’s nothing to sweat until you see a Doberman with a teapot.”)

The ginger bears had left the others, and Ben realized they had done so to watch their Jack Russell tentatively approach the fire hydrant. There was a glimmer of dad-like pride on their faces as the dog began circling the alien totem, obviously as baffled by its presence as the humans were. When he finally headed off without lifting his leg, the ginger bears were noticeably crestfallen, though Ben did not remark upon it.

It occurred to him that Michael would probably have suspected these guys from the get-go. Michael was a bear himself, though not exactly a member of their fraternal order. He had once remarked that the most hidebound of bears, the ones who invoked manhood in beards, suspenders and long johns, had a penchant for cramming their homes with juvenilia: mid-century cookie jars and Disney figurines under glass domes.

That corny fire hydrant certainly fit the profile.

“Well,” said Ben, slapping his knees as he rose from the bench. “Time to hit the road, I guess.”

A cloud passed over Cliff’s face. “Don’t go on my account. I can sit anywhere.”

Ben felt bad for the old guy, who, for one reason or another, always seemed on the verge of apology. “No, I’d love to hang out. I’ve just got shopping to do. We’re cooking for a friend of my partner’s tonight.” Ben usually called Michael his husband but had gone with the less threatening word in deference to Cliff’s age and the likelihood that he was straight. Michael wouldn’t approve, but Ben saw it as good manners.

“Well,” said Cliff. “Cook him something nice.”

“It’s a her, actually.” He decided to make it more interesting for Cliff. “Maybe you’ve heard of her. She had a TV show here in the late eighties. Mary Ann Singleton?”

Cliff blinked at him in mild befuddlement. “She still lives here?”

Ben shook his head. “She’s been back East for years. She’s just visiting. You remember the show?”

“Sure. Went to it once even, sat in the audience. Got her autograph. Not personally, but . . . her producer took it.”

“No kidding? Small world.”

Roman appeared and nuzzled the leash in Ben's hand. "I guess that's my cue," he said, grateful for another excuse to get out of there.

Delano's Market was just around the corner from the dog park, but Ben took Roman all the way back to where the car was parked on Eureka, so he could drive into the market's basement entrance. This was one of the few occasions when he'd leave Roman in the car, having heard too many stories about dogs being snatched for use as "bait" in dogfights. It sickened him to think that such cruelty could happen here, but it did, and not infrequently. In fact, one of Roman's playmates at the park, a nervous little boxer named Mercy, had been rescued during a dogfight bust in the Excelsior.

Leaving a window cracked, Ben locked the Prius and headed up the stairs to the market. Just before he reached the top, his cell phone tingled against his thigh, so he retrieved it from a tangle of biodegradable poop bags and checked the readout.

It was Michael's gardening assistant, a cub named Jake Greenleaf.

"Hey there," said Ben.

"Hey, Ben. You seen your hubby? He's not picking up, and one of our clients is looking for him."

"He should be at the house," said Ben.

"He's not answering, if he is."

"Then he must be with Mary Ann."

"Who?"

"You know . . . the one who came out when Anna had her stroke."

"The hot Connecticut mess?"

Ben chuckled. "Whatever."

"What's she doing here?"

"I dunno. It's all very mysterious."

"Well, if you hear from him, tell him Karl Rove's got a bug up his ass again."

"Will he know what that means?"

"Oh, yeah," said Jake. "Oh, yeah."

3

Solid Proof

The nastiest clients, in Jake's opinion, were not the rich ones but the ones who used to be rich, the ones who made a huge wad during the dot-com boom and lost it in a big way. Downsizing, as they liked to call it, had turned them into assholes who couldn't afford a driver anymore but still wanted a gardener to boss around.

Like this client—the one who looked like a younger Karl Rove—who came charging out of his house the moment Jake returned his cell phone to his backpack.

“Did you reach him?”

“Not yet. I left a message.”

The client grunted and rolled his eyes.

Jake had tried to be nice to this loser, but the guy was always such a dick. He never asked for Jake's opinion about anything. When Michael wasn't around, in fact, he barely spoke to Jake at all. Jake was just a day laborer in Karl Rove's eyes, not a junior partner in the business, and these failed dot-commers always had to talk to the boss.

“Here's the deal,” said Jake. “This is my specialty. I've been doing rock gardens for Michael for over three years. If you wanna turn that fountain back into a planter you're gonna need drainage, and that means we're gonna hafta hammer a hole in that concrete. You can talk to Michael, but he'll just tell you the same thing—”

“I don't doubt that, Jason—”

“Jake.”

“Whatever . . . Jake.”

“I spoke to Michael's husband,” Jake said evenly. “He's dealing with a family emergency.” It wasn't the truth, but it was sort of the truth and easier

than explaining that Michael's favorite drama queen had just rolled into town with a fresh steaming load of drama. Besides, Michael was pushing sixty and having serious issues with one of his rotator cuffs. He had earned the right to some downtime, whatever the reason.

Jake lifted the jackhammer off the ground, letting it swing from his hand gunslinger-style. "Want me to keep going?"

The client nodded sullenly. "Yeah . . . just have Michael call me."

"No problem."

Napoleon headed back toward the house, then stopped and turned with a mean little smirk on his face. "You might wanna . . ." He tapped his forefinger against his cheek. "Your beard is splattered with something."

He knows, thought Jake. He knows and he's having fun with me.

Jake's free hand shot to his beard and made an exploratory search. "Oh . . . the jackhammer. Hit a wet spot. Hope it wasn't cat shit."

He was trying to show that he was indifferent to mud and beyond humiliation by this douche bag, but the wildfire raging across his face told another story. He hated those telltale blushes. They came less often these days, but when they did, they came with a holy vengeance. And that wasn't who he was anymore. Or at least who he wanted to be.

Maybe it's the testosterone, he thought. Maybe the hormone intensifies what's already there—like it does with hair growth and muscle mass. Wouldn't that suck big-time? It didn't seem likely, but he could ask about it on Wednesday at the Lou Sullivan Society. There might be other guys there with similar experiences.

If you can manage to keep from blushing, dude.

The client went back into the house. Jake finished his jackhammering and lost himself in the arrangement of rocks on the slope. He had picked out these rocks himself at the stone yard in Berkeley. They were rough and honey-colored, streaked with purple and rust, and he enjoyed finding their kinship to each other as he embedded them in the soil. They were like pieces of a puzzle that he was building and solving at the same time. When all the rock was in place, he would have the entirely different satisfaction of tucking moss and soft grasses between the cracks. That was the icing on the cake.

It didn't matter that he was doing this for a douche nozzle. This rock garden was Jake's when all was said and done. He would photograph it, remember it, imagine it years from now as a mossy ruin from an earlier time—*his* ruin—since the guy who builds something owns it forever. Even after Karl Rove had died or moved away, this mighty tumble of golden stone would still be Jake's, solid proof of his days on earth.

He had said something like that the week before at Lou Sullivan. Not before the group or anything—he was way too shy for that—just gabbing afterward with a hot trans dude named Rocco, who had already announced his taste for men. Jake had hoped to impress him with his devotion to his work, but ended up sounding like a total garden geek. It didn't help that a butch bio guy was lurking nearby pretending to swig on a Snapple but obviously ready to pounce on Rocco as soon as Jake was done boring him to death with horticulture. He left just after that, choosing solitude over disgrace.

He was no good at meeting people. Even at a support group for trans folk he felt like a visiting Martian. He had thought that would change once he'd made the leap, but so far, claiming another gender—even the one that came naturally to him—had merely offered new ways to feel alienated, new opportunities for humiliation. His hookups with bio guys had been one-night stands at best; the only good that had ever come from that had been meeting Michael and thereby landing this job. A lot of bio guys were just in it for the novelty, losing interest altogether once their curiosity was satisfied. As for other trans guys, they were either cruising the Lone Star for liquored-up bio bears or flirting with the femme dykes down at the Lexington Club. They weren't looking for Jake.

Still, his drive for completion never waned. In fact, once he'd begun the testosterone, the urgency for the surgery had grown even greater. So he was saving his money, biding his time until the day of deliverance. He was barely past thirty, anyway; the man of his dreams could wait until the plumbing was adjusted. For the moment, at least, *he* was the man of his dreams, and everything else was needless distraction.

Besides, there were matters far more pressing than finding a partner. Like, for instance, how to pee believably. That was less of an issue in San Francisco, where people were used to surprises, but he dreaded the thought of being clocked at a urinal in, say, Bakersfield or San Leandro. Michael,

after all, often sent him off on shopping forays to nurseries in the suburban boonies. So Jake had sent away for something called a Freshette—a funnel-and-tube urination device used by bio women on camping trips.

He had worn this thing in his boxer briefs for several days before realizing—on a bus full of school kids, no less—that the funnel looked like some sort of weird domed erection. So he'd trimmed the Freshette down to a less disturbing size before threading its tube through the shaft of a small cushiony dildo he'd found at Good Vibrations. They called it a “packer,” he learned that very day, and it was just what he needed: something believable to pull out of his fly when privacy was impossible.

He was getting there.

For three years Jake had been living in the Duboce Triangle with someone he thought of as his “tranmother.” Anna Madrigal was in her late eighties but still getting about. She'd had a stroke a few years back, remaining in a coma for several days, but she'd recovered and since that time had seemed as blissfully fearless as the sole survivor of an air disaster. Her energy was flagging, but she could still be found plodding around the neighborhood in kimono and sneakers, a look that could sometimes border on bag lady. Jake knew better. Anna had a decent nest egg from the sale of a house on Russian Hill, where, once upon a time, back in the seventies, she had been Michael's landlady.

Anna treasured her independence, so Jake never called himself her companion or caregiver, though that's how he saw it—and proudly. The old girl was something of an icon among local trans folk, so he found it something of a privilege to keep an eye on her and do her heavy hauling. But mostly, of course, she was just good company.

And that was the reason he headed home for lunch that day. The drive from Pacific Heights to the Duboce Triangle and back again would eat up most of his lunch hour, but he needed a serious dose of Anna, however small. His heart sank when he entered the flat and she wasn't in her favorite armchair by the window.

“Yoo hoo,” he called, using the silly greeting she sometimes used. He had never done that before and surprised himself with the sound of it.

There was no answer, so he went down the hall toward the bedrooms.

“Anna . . . I brought us sandwiches from the corner.”

Still no response. Her bedroom was empty, so he figured she was out on one of her constitutionals. It served him right, of course, for not calling first, but he'd always enjoyed the way her face lit up when she received unexpected company.

He headed to the kitchen for a glass of juice. There, beneath a shaft of afternoon sunlight, he found her. She was lying on her side on the floor, her face turned away from him. Her old cat, Notch, was perched solemnly on her hip, as if standing guard. Jake felt the blood rush from his face as violently as it could rush in.

"Oh, no," he murmured, moving closer to her body. The cat rose to its feet, still balanced on Anna's hip, and arched its back lazily, completely indifferent to whatever the fuck was going on. Jake, meanwhile, had forgotten how to breathe.

"Oh, Jesus," he said. "Jesus—"

"No call for that," Anna said sternly.

Jake gasped with relief and went to her side, squatting so he could see her face. Notch leaped from her hip and strode briskly away. "What happened?" asked Jake.

"Just having a little snooze."

"*On the floor?*"

"It's nice down here. The linoleum's so smooth and cool. I see why Notch likes it."

He considered, then dismissed, the possibility that Anna had finally lost her mind. "You fell, didn't you?"

"Maybe a little bit."

"When?"

"Not that long ago. Who knows? I've been sleeping." She extended her hand. "Give us a lift, dear."

"No . . . wait . . . you may have broken something."

"Don't be melodramatic. I'm not in pain. I was just catching my breath, and I fell asleep."

So Jake helped her sit up for a moment before scooping her in his arms and rising to his feet. She was a good four inches taller than he, but surprisingly light, an armful of velvet and bones. As he carried her down the hall, he caught the scent of her perfume, which he remembered was

called Devon Violets. The name had always puzzled him, since violets—at least the ones *he* knew about—didn't have a scent.

"Where are we going?" asked Anna.

"To the armchair. To eat our sandwiches."

Looking up at him, she chortled. "I feel like Scarlett."

He didn't get it. "Johansson?"

"No, child . . . O'Hara."

"Who's that?"

"Oh . . . that is depressing."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, dear. Just being silly."

Anna pecked at her sandwich but gobbled up the black-bottom cupcake he had brought as an afterthought. He had read somewhere that old people eventually lost their more refined taste buds, so that only really sweet things held their interest in the end. He wondered if that was true, and if he should start finding ways to make main courses seem more like dessert. He was a crummy cook, though—or at least a fairly disinterested one; Anna was much better in the kitchen than he would ever be.

"That was lovely," said Anna, dabbing at the crumbs on her chin with the tissue she kept tucked in her sleeve. "Very thoughtful of you, dear."

"I have to get back soon," he said. "Michael's not working."

"Oh, no. His shoulder?"

"No . . . well, it's still hurting him, but . . . he's spending the day with his friend from Connecticut."

Anna's watery blue eyes blinked at him, absorbing the news. "Mary Ann's in town?"

"Mmm."

Anna drew back, frowning a little. "Why do you say it like that?"

"I didn't say anything. I said 'Mmm.'"

"Yes, dear . . . but your *tone*."

Jake shrugged. "I just think . . . she's kind of a pain."

Anna seemed to take this personally. "You've met her only once."

Jake remembered it well. Mary Ann had flown into town (in her husband's private jet, no less) when Anna was already deep in her coma. It was a nice enough gesture, Jake supposed, but Mary Ann would never have

known about Anna at all if Michael hadn't tracked her down. Sure, she must have been nervous about facing friends she hadn't seen for decades, but beyond that there was something off-putting about her: a certain aloofness that made Jake feel instantly judged and dismissed.

Since that time Mary Ann and Michael had been talking a lot on the phone. According to Ben, who shared Jake's assessment of this woman, Mary Ann would call to unload at least four times a week. And it was always about her: her distant husband and unappreciative stepson, her dead dream of being a network anchor, her really lousy night at the country club. To hear Ben tell it, Michael rarely got a word in edgewise.

"It's not like I hate her," said Jake. "I'm just not real big on her."

Anna regarded him soberly over her teacup. "Do you know why she's here?"

Jake shook his head. "Ben doesn't even know. Whatever it is, she was saving it for a face-to-face with Michael."

"Which is when?"

"Now . . . I guess."

The old lady nodded methodically, her beach-glass eyes fixed on the sycamore across the street. Jake wondered if she was hurt, if she felt left out of the loop. Mary Ann had been her darling once upon a time, her ingénue on Barbary Lane.

Anna fidgeted with a strand of snowy hair before tucking it behind her ear.

"I wonder if Shawna knows," she said quietly.

The Puppy Stuff

That morning, of all mornings, Shawna had seriously considered changing her hair. The Bettie Page look had served her well, but it just didn't pack the same wallop anymore. These days the Mission was awash with wannabe Betties in glossy black pageboys and crimson lipstick. Last week, in fact, when Shawna was shopping at a clothes-by-the-pound shop on Valencia Street, the chick who weighed her seed-pearl sweater set could easily have been her double. To say nothing of that über-obnoxious woman on last season's *Project Runway*. Clearly it was time to throw in the bangs.

She was finishing her frittata when she got the tweet—four words screaming obscenely from her BlackBerry—BETTIE PAGE IS DEAD. One of Shawna's fans, the self-described Piercing Diva of Dubuque, had jumped at the chance to share the news with her. The iconic fifties pinup who had somehow made naughty so nice had suffered a fatal heart attack after a bout with pneumonia. She was eighty-five.

Shawna was surprised by how hard it hit her. She had always loved Bettie—or at least the *idea* of her—but Bettie had also seemed slightly unreal, a human-size Minnie Mouse in the Disneyland of desire. Now all she could see was an old woman who'd been living with her brother somewhere in L.A. She remembered Bettie's three divorces and her struggles with schizophrenia and how she'd regretted tossing out her fishnet stockings after she found Jesus and went to work for the Billy Graham Crusade. Mostly she remembered how Bettie had avoided cameras after her "rediscovery" in the nineties, striving to protect her myth. That myth was finally safe. Now that she was dead.

Shawna rose from the kitchen table with a sigh and went to the rose-tinted mirror at the end of the hall. She studied herself soberly for a

moment, checking her lipstick, testing the silken weight of her pageboy in her hands. *What now? Do I hang on to this pelt out of respect for Bettie or abandon it for the same reason?*

She would think about that later. Her blog needed attention (not to mention her advertisers), so there was really no time for reinvention. Besides, she was meeting her boyfriend for lunch, and he might have some thoughts on the subject.

For the fourth time that month Shawna met Otto at the Circus Center. This was a yellow-brick building on Frederick, an old high school gymnasium, very Deco-looking, with huge metal-frame windows that filled the room with soft gray light as acrobats practiced on the trapeze. Shawna sat in the top row of the bleachers, as far away from the action as possible, since she hated the thought of embarrassing Otto in his element.

Otto was actually his real name, though he'd lengthened it to Ottokar for his professional handle. The original Ottokar had been emperor of Bohemia—something Otto had learned from a Tintin comic book. He was a lanky, lion-maned man who rode a beat-up bicycle, when he wasn't riding a unicycle, and carried coffee-stained paperbacks in his knapsack. The night they met (the night Iron & Wine came to the Café du Nord) they'd talked mostly about the music, learning next to nothing about each other. Shawna liked that—not because she was in any way ashamed of her work but because Otto had come to their hookup with none of the usual expectations. He'd never even heard of Grrrl on the Loose, much less followed a blog, so her raffish online persona had never worked its cheap tricks on him. This guy wanted the girl—not the Grrrl—and that made all the difference to Shawna. Bettie Page, poor thing, should have been so lucky.

When Otto told her he was a clown—came out to her, in effect, with a mortified grimace as if he'd just confessed something horrendous—her heart had gone out to him. She'd tried to show him she was totally cool about it, that she understood his art form beyond the kitschy creepiness of Ronald McDonald and Bozo the Clown. She'd told him about her passion for Fellini and how her gay uncle Michael (who wasn't *technically* her uncle) had introduced her to Cirque du Soleil when she was seven years old.

But all the while she'd been fixated on something else: a report she'd once written for her blog about a local group whose fetish was fucking in clown costumes. She had witnessed this phenomenon herself one rainy night on Minna Street, though it had struck her as more of a stunt than an actual fetish. ("Call me old-fashioned," she would later write, "but when I feel something red and round and hard, I don't want it to be a nose.") She had left the party early, apologizing to the host, having learned nothing beyond the obvious reality that lube and greasepaint were not each other's friends.

Of course those people had just *pretended* to be clowns. Otto was the real deal; he approached his craft with a dignity that bordered on the sacramental, especially when he made his rounds at schools and nursing homes. She respected him for his charity work and admired his expertise with unicycles and bowling pins, and generally found him to be sweet and a great deal of fun in the sack, but she never started taking him seriously—much less gazed into his heart—until she met Sammy.

Sammy was a life-size monkey puppet who rode on Ottokar's arm. In the routine Sammy would poke teasingly at Ottokar until the clown became angry and smacked the monkey in the face, knocking him to the ground. Aghast at what he had done, Ottokar would scoop Sammy into his arms, where, like a simian pietà, Sammy would hang as limp as the rag that he was. Ottokar's frantic efforts at reviving Sammy would eventually succeed (to the audible relief of the audience) only to be undone when the clown stumbled and fell, crushing the monkey under his weight. For a long time all the audience could see was Ottokar's inert form. Then, limb by skinny limb, Sammy would appear again, pulling himself from beneath the body of his friend.

What was it about this bit that had endeared Otto to her? Had it simply shown he was a nice guy, a compassionate person, or was it something to do with his irony, his weary grasp of life's betrayals? Whatever it was, her defenses had fallen on the spot. Her previous lover, a Brooklyn lighting designer named Lucy Juarez, had worn Shawna down with her melodrama and free-range jealousy. Lucy had been the ultimate buzz-kill, in fact, the final nail in the coffin of Shawna's two-year New York experiment. She had moved East to sell a book (or a "blook," as Lucy had once snidely called it, since almost all of it had come from the blog) and partly to show her doting

single dad that it was time for them to pursue separate lives. But her dad had long ago hit the road in his RV, and Brooklyn, for all its pioneer charm, was starting to wear a little thin. When she packed her bags and headed back to San Francisco, she felt no shame about it whatsoever, only a determination to simplify her life and cut out the neurotic bullshit once and for all.

Maybe, come to think of it, that's why Otto had seemed so right.

He was in the ring now, walking on stilts, except they were more of a cross between stilts and skis, and he could bounce on them, like some sort of alien marsupial. Shawna remembered that he was trying out an act that he was taking to Pier 39. He was wearing his "civvies," as he liked to call them, loose jeans and a ragged gray T-shirt. His only piece of clown gear was the nose itself—that inevitable fucking red rubber ball. She watched him for at least fifteen minutes, enjoying the flirty moves of his muscles, before he spotted her in the stands and raised his arm in a solemn salute.

Ten minutes later, having finally shed the stilt-ski contraptions, he sat down next to her and pecked her on the cheek, still wearing the nose.

"Hello, Mr. Kar."

"Hey, Puppy." She had once made the fatal mistake of sharing this childhood nickname with Otto, so he felt called upon to use it from time to time. She found that somewhat endearing, in spite of the seriously heavy shit it dredged up for her.

"I brought sandwiches," she said, patting the plastic bag next to her. "I thought we could go to the park. Ever been to the AIDS Grove?"

He shook his head. "Can't say I have."

She smiled faintly. "I know it sounds morbid. Like . . . Cancer Valley or something, but it's incredibly gorgeous right now and I think you might—"

"Hey. I'm there."

So they walked into the park through the Stanyan Street entrance, passing the usual array of bongo players, children, and homeless people until they arrived at the AIDS Memorial Grove, a sunken dell full of redwoods and winding paths. They ate their lunch on the curving stone bench next to the Circle of Friends, where hundreds of names were engraved in ever-expanding circles, like ripples from a stone thrown into a pond.

“Are these all dead people?” Otto asked, munching on his sandwich.

“Not all of them. Some are just donors. See . . . there’s Sharon Stone over there.”

Otto screwed up his face. “That’s kind of confusing, isn’t it? How can you pay your respects to them if you don’t know who’s dead and who isn’t?”

She agreed with him and told him so. How badly, *really*, did Sharon Stone need to see her name in print? Wasn’t there a friend—or even some stranger—she could have memorialized instead? And Calvin Klein, for fuck’s sake. Why did he have to put his name here, of all places, when it was already on half the asses in the country?

She rose and moved closer to the circle, squatting so she could point to a name.

“Here’s one I know about for sure.”

Otto leaned forward to read it. “Jon Fielding. You knew him?”

She shook her head. “He died before I was born. He was Michael’s partner.”

He was struggling to place the name, so she helped him out. “You met him at the farmers’ market. The gay guy I call my uncle?”

“Oh . . . yeah. With the young . . . uh, husband.”

“Very good,” she said, smiling at him.

“Hey, I’m from Portland, okay?”

She laughed and looked back at Jon’s name. “He was hella handsome. I’ve seen pictures of him. My dad really liked him.”

She could see his wheels turning for a moment. Then, hesitantly, he said: “So your dad is gay, too.”

“No. He just . . . lived among them.” She was amused by the anthropological sound of that, like some overly serious voiceover on the Discovery Channel. *Brian Hawkins has explored the darkest reaches of San Francisco, where for many years he lived peaceably among the homosexuals.*

“Well . . . that’s cool,” said Otto.

“Yeah. I had some fierce uncles.”

“What about your mom?”

Shawna shrugged, since they had talked about this before. “She was a flight attendant or . . . whatever they called them. She died when I was

born.”

“I meant your adoptive mom.”

“She left when I was five. Left *us* . . . me and my dad. I really don’t know her.”

“You haven’t seen her since then?”

“Oh, I’ve seen her. She came out several years ago when my friend Anna was sick. And I went to see her once in Connecticut when I was still living in Brooklyn.”

“And?”

“She was married to a retired Republican CEO and lived in a big house on a golf course. The sandwiches she served—I swear to you—had the crusts cut off.”

Otto winced sympathetically. “Do you know why she left in the first place?”

“A job in New York, my dad said. I don’t remember it. She was a local TV personality. She had a show here called *Mary Ann in the Morning*.”

“Aha. So that’s where you got it from.”

“Got what?”

“Being a personality.”

She felt her face turning hot. “I’m not a *personality*! Where did you get that? Don’t call me a personality.”

He smiled in appeasement. “I just meant . . . media in general. And you moved to New York and all . . . for professional purposes . . . like she did.”

Shawna grunted. “I wasn’t following in her footsteps, believe me.”

“I do, Puppy. I believe you.”

“And while we’re at it, could you lay off the Puppy stuff ? I told you that in the weakest possible moment, and I really hate being called that.”

“Sorry . . . I thought your dad called you that.”

“Only because Mary Ann did.”

“And that would be . . . ?”

“The woman we’re talking about.”

“Right. Got it. No more Puppy.” He seemed to be puzzling over something.

“What?” she asked.

“I thought you couldn’t remember her.”

“I can’t. Not really.”

“But you remember Puppy?”

“My dad told me that when I was a teenager. To convince me she didn’t have ice water in her veins.”

Otto shrugged. “Sounds like she liked you a *little*.”

“Sure,” said Shawna. “Just not enough to keep her here.”

The Truest Alarm

The first thing Mary Ann looked for at Michael's house was the new construction at the end of the garden. Like the rest of the house, this Lilliputian structure was cedar-shingled and one-story, with latticework on the street side, which was already threaded with roses. Michael had referred to the place as a "cottage" in a recent phone conversation, but that was really stretching it. It was barely as big as one of those 1920s Model T garages that people here turned into gardening sheds. Its shingles were still raw and blond, having yet to know the rains of a Northern California winter. All in all, it was kind of sweet.

The rest of the compound seemed unchanged since her last visit. (She thought of it as a compound, since it was really three old "earthquake shacks" that had been strung together to make a higgledy-piggledy house.) Climbing from the taxi, she found herself unexpectedly buoyed by the sight of her old friend's deftly feathered nest. Unlike the old house on Barbary Lane, this one still harbored someone she loved.

Michael must have been looking out for her, because he was halfway down the garden path when the taxi pulled away. "Babycakes," he called, opening his arms to her. In three years his salt-and-pepper hair had lost most of its pepper, and his stomach beneath his untucked green Polo shirt had become a sturdy dome that approximated an early pregnancy. She remembered Michael telling her the belly was caused by his HIV meds. Lipodystrophy, he called it. Likewise the grooves in his cheeks, which she might have described as rugged had she not known differently. Only his smile was unchanged.

She leaned against him for a moment, accepting his warmth in silence. Finally, she pulled away. "This is sweet of you."

“C’mon.”

“I’m so fucked up.”

He gave her an ironic smile. “I’m gonna need more than that.”

“You’ll get it. Trust me.”

He led her into the house. Once he had settled her on the couch, he brought out a cheesecake, which prompted him, naturally, to make a forced joke about *The Golden Girls*. She wondered if some of that belly might be attributable to natural causes.

“This isn’t my usual practice,” he said, apparently reading her mind.

“It looks yummy,” she said. “Can I pass for now?”

He looked more bewildered than offended. “Sure . . . of course. Would you rather vaporize?”

“Do what?”

“I told you about it, remember? Very little smoke, just cannabis-flavored air. It’s a great buzz, and it saves your lungs.”

The last thing she needed right now was something that would make her story more vivid than it already was. “You wouldn’t have any vodka, would you?”

“You bet.” He headed back to the kitchen with the cheesecake, stopping at the door. “Cranberry or tonic?”

“On the rocks would be fine.”

“Should I make one for myself, or do you want me sober?”

“Whatever you want,” she said absently. “It doesn’t matter.”

Michael returned with two glasses of vodka—one on the rocks for her, one with cranberry for him. She took a sip of hers without waiting to toast him, since it would have felt weird at a time like this. Then she widened her eyes to approximate delight and offered her own bit of stalling: “It’s wonderful about Obama, isn’t it?”

He agreed with her less exuberantly than she’d expected. “Yeah . . . pretty amazing.”

“But?”

“C’mon . . . it was ‘Yes, We Can’ followed by ‘No, You Can’t.’”

“Oh you mean . . . the proposition?” She knew how clumsy this sounded the moment she said it, but she couldn’t remember the number of the damn proposition and she didn’t want to sound disinterested. “What a heartbreak that was.”

“More like a rat-fuck.”

“I should have mentioned that first. I’ve just been so preoccupied . . . to put it mildly. It didn’t *un*marry you, did it?”

“Who knows? There’s gonna be a ruling in the spring.”

Michael and Ben had been married for the third time in August. The first wedding had been performed at City Hall but was thrown out by the state courts. The second had happened at a B&B in Vancouver but was valid only in Canada. The third one Michael had referred to as the “shotgun marriage” since he and Ben had rushed to say their vows before the November election, when the voters would have their say.

“Well,” she said lamely, “I’m sure it’ll take eventually.”

“Like a flu shot.” He gave her a half-lidded smile.

“If only,” she replied ruefully.

“If only what?”

“There were an inoculation against marriage.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “Are we still talking about me?”

She took a long slug of her drink, set it down and turned to face him.

“I’m leaving Bob,” she said quietly. “I’ve left him.”

Michael nodded slowly, seemingly unsurprised.

Had she been that obvious? She knew her late-night phone calls to Michael had sometimes been protracted rants, but they had mostly been nonspecific, focused on the tedium of life in Darien or the tedium of life in general. She had hardly talked about Bob at all. “How did you know?” she asked.

He shrugged as if it were obvious. “You never talked about him. Happy people talk about their spouses.”

“Do they?”

“Did you just get bored or something?”

“No . . . well, a little, but I could’ve dealt with that. He was decent enough most of the time and . . . you know, a good provider.”

“As they say,” Michael added, and Mary Ann could have sworn she detected the shadow of a smirk. She wondered if he saw her as a spoiled suburban housewife, someone who had long ago sold out everything for a man who could “provide.”

“So what was the problem?” he asked.

She took another slug of the vodka and set it down. "I caught him fucking someone."

"Well . . . that would do it."

"Someone I know, in fact. My life coach."

"Your *life coach*? Whatshername, you mean? Calliope?"

She nodded dolefully.

"The woman you want to be when you grow up?"

She winced. "I don't think I put it *quite* that way, but . . ." She didn't bother to deny it; that was *exactly* the way she had put it, and Michael knew that better than anyone. She had raved about Calliope for hours on end—her womanly wisdom, her impeccable sense of style, her absolute commitment to Mary Ann's fulfillment.

Michael's lip flickered in a way that she recognized all too well.

"Go ahead and laugh," she told him.

"Sorry . . . it's just a little—"

"No. It's a scream. You think I don't know that? Remember how she was always chastising me for my wudda/cudda/shudda? 'Stop with the wudda/cudda/shudda, Mary Ann!' Well, she wudda and she cudda and she did."

Michael smiled, but his eyes were glassy with sympathy.

"Maybe," he offered tentatively, "it was just a one-time thing. Maybe it wasn't even serious."

She shook her head. "It was serious. Venice is always serious."

He frowned. "You were in Venice?"

"*They* were in Venice. I was in Darien."

"Then how could you walk in on them?"

"I *didn't* walk in on them. We were Skyping."

His expression told her nothing.

"You know what that is, right?"

"Of course . . . Oprah uses it. I'm just trying to visualize this."

"Bob thought it would be nice if we could see each other when he was on the road. He's on a ton of boards all over the world." She could feel angry tears assembling behind her eyes, but held them back, knowing they'd be better spent later. Michael, meanwhile, was tugging methodically on his silver mustache, already deep in speculation.

“Anyway,” she continued, “he was in Venice at the Gritti Palace—supposedly meeting with this group of investors—and I had something really important to tell him, so we Skyped for about fifteen minutes, and he blew me a kiss good-night, and the stupid son of a bitch forgot to turn off the Webcam.”

Michael parenthesized his head with his hands, waiting.

“It was kind of sweet at first . . . strangely intimate. He drifted off and I could watch him snoozing on this beautiful hand-painted bed with a gorgeous view of the Grand Canal. Then Calliope came into the room with an armful of Dolce and Gabbana shopping bags and crawled onto the bed with him.”

“Fuck me,” said Michael.

Mary Ann nodded. “That’s more or less what she said.” She picked up the glass again and polished off the remains with a grimace. “The sick part is, I couldn’t stop looking. I watched until the bitter goddamn end. Like some crummy porno with a flat-assed old man pounding away on a Botoxed crack-whore.”

Michael blinked at her. “His ass is flat? You never told me *that*.”

“Mouse . . . can we stay on the subject.” The ancient nickname just tumbled out of its own accord, now that she was finally coming clean.

He picked up her glass. “Want another one?”

She shook her head. “That was enough, thanks.”

He set down the glass and slipped his arm across her shoulder. “You know . . . I can’t say I’m terribly surprised.”

“I can’t, either. He hasn’t been . . . you know . . . *present* emotionally for several years. The sex wasn’t much to speak of, but we weren’t that young anymore and I just thought we were entering . . . the cozy stage. I was kind of relieved, to tell you the truth.” She realized too late that she had said this to someone her own age who—to hear him tell it, at least—was having the best sex of his life. She hoped he wouldn’t bring that up.

“So what was it you called to tell him?”

It was uncanny, after all these years, how Michael could still find his way so deftly to the epicenter of her pain.

“That I was worried about being pregnant,” she replied.

His mouth opened slightly, and he made a little huffing sound that didn’t quite qualify as laughter. “You’re kidding, right?”

His disbelief was understandable, but it still felt like an act of petty cruelty. She couldn't help but sound wounded. "It does happen, you know, to women my age. It's rare, but it happens. Even when we've been through menopause."

"So *were* you pregnant? *Are* you?"

"No," she said quietly. "It was . . . a false alarm." What an odd way to put it, she thought, since what she was feeling now was the truest alarm imaginable. An unwanted pregnancy, however inconveniently late in life, paled in comparison.

"But why would you even *think* you were—"

"I was bleeding, Mouse. I thought I was getting my period again."

The room was so incredibly still that she could hear, from somewhere in Michael and Ben's kitchen, the sound of a dripping faucet. Or more likely one of those aerated water bowls for dogs, given the way these guys seemed to dote on their Labradoodle.

When she finally spoke, it might have been someone else.

"I have uterine cancer."

After a moment, Michael just said: "Shit."

"I know this isn't fair to you, Mouse. There was just no one else I could tell. Darien's too much of a hornet's nest and—"

"Sweetie." Michael slipped his arm across her shoulder, trying to pull her closer, but she felt herself resisting. She still wasn't ready to collapse yet. He sensed this and released her after a squeeze or two. "Bob doesn't know, then?"

She shook her head. "He's probably still freaked that I might be pregnant."

"Shouldn't you tell him—?"

"God, no."

"He hasn't come home yet, I take it?"

"No."

Now she was wondering if Bob and Calliope were still at the Gritti or if they'd taken their act to some other romantic venue, someplace to the south, maybe, sunny and by the sea. If only she had muted the Skype—or just turned the damned thing off—as soon as she had seen what was happening. Now, for the rest of her days, she would have to live with those voices,

gruff with lust, then oh-so-achingly tender, voices that were already cutting into her like knives when that clueless young doctor told her the news.

She turned and looked at her old friend.

“Mouse, if you can’t do this, just say so.”

6

Not to Be Alone

Normally, with groceries in the car, Ben would have headed straight home, but he wasn't sure how much time Michael needed with Mary Ann, and he didn't relish the thought of walking in on whatever drama was unfolding. So he headed over to his workshop on Norfolk Street and finished staining a stair-step *tansu* that was slated for delivery on Monday. Roman, as usual, was thrilled to be there, feverishly prowling the shop for the mice that were known to live behind the walls. The place had once been an appliance repair shop, so even with the addition of whitewash and fiberglass skylights, it hovered on the funky side of dilapidated. Ben loved it, though, loved its rich aromas of cedar dust and linseed oil and the quiet afternoons he spent here, alone with his craft.

As he brushed the stain onto the *tansu*, he gazed wistfully across the room at a rustic fireplace surround he'd started on nine months earlier. He and Michael had settled on the pinecone motif, since the piece had been intended—was *still* intended—for their fireplace in Pinyon City. Except that there *was* no fireplace, much less a cabin; just three acres of rocky, sloping ground with an unbelievable view of a Sierra range. He had bought the land before the economy began to tank, when there were still people in the market for museum-grade furniture. He'd envisioned their own secret Eden, where Michael could grow old in the bosom of nature and he, Ben, could have ready access to snowboarding. He'd pictured rocking chairs on the deck and hikes up the canyon with Roman and occasional trips into Pinyon City for drinks at the corner saloon.

For the moment, of course, building *anything* was out of the question, since Ben could barely manage the mortgage on the land. Michael was in similar straits—still paying the mortgage on the city house—and his

shoulder was threatening to put him out of commission for a while. There were hopes that this new administration might be able to fix the economy, but even the most optimistic observers believed that it would take a while—years, even. All things considered, not a time to go further into debt.

Still, there was no reason they couldn't enjoy the place now, cabin or no cabin. They could pitch a tent there (at least in the summertime) and wake up beneath the pines with the scent of sage in their nostrils. Michael, of course, could get grumpy as hell on camping trips, but that was mostly at public campgrounds where the crowds made him noticeably misanthropic. "I didn't come to the wilderness," he had once announced a little loudly at a campground in New Mexico, "for the chance to shower with America."

But this would be different. This would be their own turf, where they could stake a sort of spiritual claim just by spending some time there. As for showering, they could do that down the road at the state park, preferably at a time when America wasn't around. The important thing was to *be on that land*, leave their mark. Burn a little sage, maybe, make a little love. The property wasn't visible from the access road, so maybe they could find a talisman here in the city—a big stone raven or a rusty iron Quan Yen—that they could plant there on the mountainside as proof of their intentions, even when they weren't around. He loved the idea of finding it there every time they came back.

Pinyon City had become their version of the future. "We'll get that for Pinyon City," they would say when they spotted a woolen blanket in a garage sale or a set of rugged dinnerware, and they would buy that thing, whatever it was, and stuff it into the coat closet to await its eventual alpine destiny. Some of these items had been absorbed by the city house, like the rare Indian basket that Michael surprised Ben with on his birthday. Michael had tracked it down on the Internet, ordering it from a private collector in Reno. Roughly the size of a grapefruit, it was woven from pine needles and red gum—a reliable indicator that its maker had lived not far from their homestead-to-be. They had already picked the very spot it would occupy on the mantelpiece that Ben was building. It would have made it there, too—a perfect symbol of their reverence for the land and its culture—had they not displayed it on the coffee table in full view of a teething Labradoodle.

Ben stayed at the workshop until the skylights turned dove-gray with dusk. He drove home through the Mission, where the traffic was predictably

sluggish and snarled, then double-parked at a boutique pet shop in the Castro to pick up a brand of organic dog food they didn't carry at Delano's. By the time he reached Noe Hill, the sky was already doing its crazy purple thing. He stopped at the gate to admire it, then studied the house with a sense of palpable apprehension. Had she left or were they still in the thick of it?

Roman led the way, dragging Ben on the leash, delirious at the thought of an imminent reunion. Michael, as it happened, was sitting on the sofa, apparently alone, rummaging through a box of old snapshots. The dog had been trained not to jump on his masters, so he did a little river dance instead, hopping on his back legs in an unashamed exhibition of his poodle ancestry. "That's right," said Ben. "There's Dad. Give Dad a kiss." This was already a ritual with them; the dog always got the first kiss.

Ben leaned down and pecked Michael's mouth, which tasted of pot smoke, despite Michael's cherished belief that his vaporizer had magically eliminated all that. He worried sometimes that Michael smoked too much. There were days when he came home and found his husband too buzzed and chatty to connect with. At such moments Michael could lose his train of thought completely, though he usually tried to cover it up. What would happen, Ben wondered, when this chemical forgetfulness merged with the ordinary sort that comes with aging? Unless, of course, this *was* the ordinary sort.

He sat down next to Michael and leaned his head against his shoulder.

"Is Mary Ann—?"

"Back at her hotel," said Michael.

"Oh." Ben made an effort at sounding sincere. "Sorry I didn't get to say hello."

Michael wasn't buying it, of course. "I wish you liked her more."

"I don't *dislike* her. She's just . . . kind of a mess, and . . . it gets to be too much sometimes."

"In what way?"

"C'mon. She calls here three or four times a week."

"That was just *last week*."

"No, it wasn't. It's been going on for ages, and you're on the phone for hours sometimes. It feels like she's living with us, Michael." When his

husband said nothing in response, Ben added: “Not to sound jealous or anything.”

Michael lifted his head and planted a peck on Ben’s shoulder before righting himself with a grunt. “We just have a history, you know. We’ve been through a lot of shit together. I can’t just cut that off.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“I know that.”

“So what’s going on with her?”

Michael released a resonant sigh. “She has cancer. That’s why she’s here. She’s having a hysterectomy.”

Ben scrambled for the right thing to say. There was plenty of reason for sympathy, of course, but he found himself weighing his words with miserly care, wary of what was coming next. “Why isn’t she having it . . . closer to home?”

“She’s leaving Bob. She doesn’t want to be anywhere near home.”

“She’s leaving him now? Shouldn’t she at least wait until she’s—”

“She caught him fucking somebody. She saw the whole thing on Skype. She’s humiliated and heartbroken and scared shitless about the cancer. She’s just trying to take care of herself right now. So she got the fuck out of there.”

Ben knew better, of course, but he couldn’t help fixating on entirely the wrong part of that explanation: “How do you see that on Skype?”

“Sweetie . . .” Michael laid his hand tentatively on Ben’s leg before taking the leap. “She asked if she could stay in the cottage.”

Ben nodded slowly, his suspicions confirmed.

“It wasn’t easy for her to ask,” Michael added. “More than anything . . . she doesn’t want to invade our privacy.”

Ben adopted a tone that he hoped would sound compassionate yet practical. “Then why not take a hotel or rent a condo? She’s not, you know . . . hurting for cash. The cottage is barely big enough for that bed, and . . . she’ll need her own privacy, won’t she?”

“She needs not to be alone, Ben. That’s what she needs. She doesn’t have a home anymore.”

Ben knew already there was no point in resisting. He had no deep sentimental connection to Mary Ann, but Michael’s conscience—and, yes,

Ben's own—made this huge inconvenience inevitable. “How long does she want to stay?” he asked.

Michael shrugged. “The surgery is in two weeks, so . . . I guess at least that long and . . . a little bit longer.”

“Will the surgery take care of it? The cancer, I mean?”

“They won't know until they . . . get in there.”

Ben laid his hand on Michael's knee, signaling the end of the discussion, then stood up. “Call her, then . . . unless you've already agreed to it.”

His husband shook his head. “I was waiting to hear from you.”

That had to be less than the truth, but Ben appreciated the effort.

While Michael was in the bedroom talking to Mary Ann on his cell phone, Ben gave the cottage a once-over in preparation for her arrival. The sheets on the bed had not been changed since some friends from Nevada City had crashed there over Halloween, so there were still traces of green Hulk makeup on the pillowcase.

Ben stripped the bed, then hauled everything to the laundry room before tackling the cramped cottage bathroom. The toilet and sink were relatively clean, but the floor of the fiberglass shower stall was tinted the same lurid green as the pillowcase. He got on his knees and scrubbed it ferociously—a little harder than needed, in fact—while he fretted over the sea change that would soon be coming to their domestic life. He valued their daily rituals and hard-earned independence and, frankly, didn't want them fucked with. He knew that was selfish, and that charity, in this case, literally began at home, but he couldn't shake the ungenerous feeling that someone had just stolen his husband.

Back at the house, he found Michael stuffing the sheets into the washer.

“I'll get that,” Ben told him, already trying to atone for his thoughts.

“That's okay. I've got it.”

“If you need Clorox, it's on the top shelf.”

“Great.”

“Where is that fancy goat soap the two Susies gave us for Christmas last year? I thought we could put it in her bathroom.”

Michael turned and gave him a sleepy, appreciative stoner smile.

That night, after catching two inscrutable episodes of *Lost* on Apple TV, they turned in earlier than usual, leaving the lights on for a while as they scratched Roman's belly in unison. The dog was sprawled between them, dark limbs flopping, as big and goofy as a chimpanzee. For Ben, the moment had a wistful quality, since this cozy family unit would be altered dramatically come morning, when their guest would return with her expensive luggage. There was no point in kidding himself; he would just have to make the best of it and accept this altered reality as something that mattered to Michael.

"Where did you meet her again?" Ben asked, trying to take an interest. "At Anna's apartment house?"

"Mmm. Well . . . actually . . . the first time was at the Marina Safeway. She tried to pick up a boyfriend of mine."

Ben wrinkled his nose. "While you were there?"

"I was . . . you know, somewhere else in the store. She looked crushed when I showed up, poor thing. She had her heart set on him."

"Was she just clueless? Or was he really butch?"

"Butcher than me, you mean?" Michael grinned. "Still is, to tell you the truth. He was a Marine recruiter. I saw him at the Alameda Flea Market a few years back. He still looks pretty good. Totally your type. Big ol' furry chest."

Ben was touched when Michael made the effort to acknowledge his "type." He would even do it on the street sometimes when a burly daddy passed their field of vision, Michael muttering a sultry "ten o'clock" under his breath until Ben spotted the party in question. Since these men were rarely of interest to Michael—he was drawn to the younger and smoother, like Ben—the gesture was all the more impressive. He was like a beachcomber collecting shells for his beloved, when the shells meant nothing to him.

Which was not to say that Michael couldn't be jealous. Once, they ran into a playmate of Ben's on a trip to P-town. Ben found his husband sulking like a teenager in bed that night, nursing a corrosive dread of abandonment that could only be assuaged by Ben's patient insistence that forever, fuck it, meant forever. Their twenty-one-year age difference had been one of the nicer spices in their libidinal stew, but age itself could be a source of panic

for Michael. Sometimes, in fact, Ben wondered if Michael's generous daddy-spotting was just his own way of tagging and releasing his fears.

Ben scooched closer, sandwiching Roman between them as he stroked Michael's arm, soothing two creatures at once. "Didn't it bother you when she moved away?"

"What do you mean?"

"You thought you were dying, right? *She* thought you were dying."

"It was complicated, babe. She and Brian were on the rocks, and . . . she got this job offer in New York . . . and she'd already watched Jon die in the worst kind of way . . . and she couldn't handle going through that again."

"So she ran away."

Michael shrugged. "Sort of."

"Seems like a pattern."

Michael's stony silence showed Ben he had gone too far, so he changed his tone—and the subject. "She had a TV show here, right? Was she famous?"

"Oh, yeah. Her face was on the side of buses. She had a morning talk show. Sort of like Oprah, but . . . you know . . . *local*."

Ben noticed that Michael had italicized the last word with a telltale widening of the eyes. "Not great, huh?"

"It was okay. She was fine, but the show could be a little lame. You know, cooking segments and D-list celebrities. I don't blame her for wanting something more."

"Which didn't happen in New York, I take it?"

"The cable channel folded before they could get the show off the ground. She was cut adrift and ended up doing infomercials and shit. Then she worked for a fancy party planner, and that's where she met her husband, apparently. At a party."

And life got a lot easier, thought Ben.

"I don't think she married him for the money," Michael added clairvoyantly. "I think she loved him. She loved his son, too. She helped raise him."

"Where is he now? The son."

"At NYU. Freshman year. She was already feeling like an empty nester when the Skype thing happened."

It was an opening, but Ben didn't take it; he could get the details later when the time was right. Instead, he proposed that they take Mary Ann to Pinyon City, where the crisp air and snow-capped peaks might lift her spirits before the surgery—or maybe even help with her recuperation. They could rent their usual house by the river and pay a ceremonial visit to their property. Assuming, of course, she would want to.

“I think she'd love it,” said Michael, who, like Ben, believed Pinyon City could fix anything.

Somebody to Hang With

“So where goes my wandering boy tonight?”

Jake was pulling on his flight jacket at the door when Anna asked the question. He knew that “wandering boy” was just one of her old-school expressions, but it still made him feel irresponsible. Anna let him live there for nothing, even paid him for his help sometimes, so he was always wondering if he was living up to his side of the deal. “I’ll be on my cell,” he said reassuringly. “I can be home in no time.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. I was just being nosy.” Anna cupped her hand against his beard and gazed intently—embarrassingly—into his eyes. “Marguerite and Selina have invited me up for a nice Italian dinner. I’m well taken care of.” The upstairs neighbors had been, until recently, the flatmates of Jake and Anna, so, when the upstairs became available, everyone had welcomed the chance to spread out. Jake certainly had, anyway.

It wouldn’t have killed him to tell Anna where he was going, but he knew from experience that it took too much explaining. Most old-time San Franciscans—his boss Michael, for one—could be really rude about Pier 39. They saw the place as a tourist trap and a serious waste of waterfront. Most of them had never even been there, either, never seen what a good time it could be. They didn’t know shit about the fire jugglers or the cool aquarium or the funny “Gumpisms” scrawled on the tables at Bubba Gump’s Shrimp Company. They called it corny, most of them, without ever having seen it.

Jake found Pier 39 a welcome relief from the Castro. The ghetto, for all its acceptance and security, made him feel like all eyes were upon him, since, for the most part, they *were*. If they weren’t sizing him up for sex,

they were judging his believability or resenting him for denying the honest butch dyke they thought he should be. At Pier 39 Jake was just another guy in the crowd. His manhood could be casual there, an easy assumption shared by everyone. It was like being back in Tulsa at the mall—only safer.

And Jake had a major thing going with the sea lions. On evenings like this he would ride his bike all the way down Market Street to the Embarcadero just to grab an hour with those jokesters at the pier. Their raucous barking calmed his fears like no other music, and there were more of them now than he'd seen all year, since winter brought more herring. Hundreds of sea lions were sprawled on the wooden rafts provided for their comfort, while the humans watched from the rail, making noises of their own.

"Oooh . . . look at that fat one!"

"Is that one a girl or a boy, Mommy?"

"Awesome! He just knocked that other one into the water!"

"Aren't they supposed to be at Seal Rock?"

The last question had come from a round-faced young blond guy in a red hoodie, standing next to Jake. It was just one of those things that people said in a crowd, mostly hoping to feel part of the crowd, expecting an answer from anyone or no one.

"They used to be out there," Jake answered, "but they started hauling out here in 1989."

The guy turned to him and frowned. "Hauling what out?"

"That's what they call it. Hauling out. What they're doing right now. Getting out of the water so they can . . . you know, breed and all."

"Oh."

"Some people think the earthquake drove them into the bay, but there were already a few of them here by then. They were probably just getting away from their predators, since Orcas and Great Whites don't come in this far. They took over a dock that used to be here, so it got kinda testy for a while."

"Why?"

"Look at 'em. They're ginormous. And stinky. And dangerous if you get in their way. Some of the old dudes weigh almost a thousand pounds."

The blond kept his eyes on the raft, where, in the deepening twilight, the sea lions were stacked on top of each other like enormous sacks of flour.

“So cool,” he said reverently.

“Word,” replied Jake.

The next time he saw the guy, Jake was down the pier in the left-handed store buying a pocket spiral notebook. He wasn't consistently left-handed, so he didn't need most of the things they sold, even their super-cool Bahco pruning shears. Writing was pretty much the only thing he couldn't do right-handed, and since he liked to take notes on the job (like his hero, Capability Brown), he'd always hated those left-handed spirals. The clerk was putting the notebook in a bag when Red Hoodie got in line behind him.

“Dude,” he said pleasantly, catching Jake's eye.

“Oh . . . hey.”

“That for you?”

“Who else?”

“Awright!” The guy held up his hand for a high five, so Jake followed through in what he took to be a moment of left-handed brotherhood. As a man, he had never before high-fived with a guy. He would have been too embarrassed to initiate it himself, and no one else had ever offered, maybe because Jake was shorter than most guys and it would probably have looked stupid. This guy was short himself, so they could pull it off.

“What did you get?” Jake asked.

“Just some scissors.” He held them up with a Boy Scout smile. “I had to cut some poster paper last week and got me some serious blisters.”

Jake nodded. “You a teacher or something?”

“Nah . . . it was just for . . . a project.” He looked uncomfortable as his eyes darted around the store. Jake wondered if he was seriously into crafts or something and too embarrassed to admit it. “This place is cool,” said the guy.

Jake nodded. “The first of its kind in the world.”

“Where are the other ones?”

“Fuck if I know, dude.”

He had expected to get a laugh, but the guy just flinched and lost his smile for a moment. “We sure don't have 'em back home,” he said, recovering. “I can tell you that much.” He handed a \$20 bill to the clerk, waited for the change, and thanked her nicely. “Where's good to eat around here?”

For a moment Jake didn't realize that the question was directed to him. "Oh . . . well . . . I like Bubba Gump's, but that's kinda for special occasions. I usually just get something at the Pier Market and eat it on a bench somewhere. They got good crab sandwiches. The chowder's pretty good, too."

"Could you show me?"

"Sure," said Jake. "I'm goin' there anyway."

Though neither of them had suggested it, they ended up eating together.

They had waited in line together, so it had just made sense to look for a bench together. They found one at the edge of the performance area and sat on either end of it, eating their crab sandwiches while they watched a tall, skinny clown with a monkey puppet.

"He's really dope," said the blond kid.

"Yeah. He is."

The kid extended his hand. "I'm Jonah, by the way."

"Jake."

"My girlfriend would love this. She's big on clowns."

"Oh yeah? You should bring her here some time."

Jonah shook his head. "She's back at home. I'm just here for . . . work."

"Missin' her, huh?"

"Oh . . . man. A month is too long."

Jake could see the raw truth of this in Jonah's face.

"It's the best thing in the world," Jonah added. "Loving a girl like that."

There was nothing more to be said about that—especially on Jake's part—so he underscored the sentiment with a respectful silence.

Jonah, meanwhile, seemed to have embarrassed himself. He tossed his sandwich wrapper in a can and looked out at the bay for an easy way to change the subject.

"So what's that island out there?"

Jake grinned. "That's no island, dude. That's a motorized vessel."

"C'mon. It's got palm trees and a beach . . ."

"I wouldn't lie to you, man."

". . . and a lighthouse! I'm a country boy but—"

"No, dude, I swear. This wack boat builder built it back in the seventies. He's parked the thing all over the bay. They call it Forbes Island."

Jonah snorted. "Because it's an island!"

"No, because Mr. Forbes built it. Or Forbes Somebody, I forget. They run it as a restaurant now. You eat under the water and look out through portholes at the fish."

"You've seen this yourself?"

Jake shrugged. "I YouTubed it."

"How do you get out there? Or does it come to you?"

"There's a shuttle. It leaves from the dock down here."

"We gotta do this!"

"Dude, we just ate."

"I mean some other day. If you want to, I mean. I've got another week here. I could use somebody to hang with."

Even before his mention of the girlfriend, Jake had decided that Jonah wasn't gay. There was something in his eyes—or maybe a lack of something—that made him seem unavailable. For Jake this was as much a relief as a disappointment, since the prospect of sex always brought with it the need for full disclosure. Besides, there was something more valuable to be gained here: a brotherly bond with another guy that took for granted their common masculinity. He had longed for such a friendship when he was a teenager in Tulsa, but the visuals had made it impossible. Now, he had a shot at it.

"What the hell," he said, clapping Jonah on the shoulder. "You're on."

Anna was sitting up with a book when Jake returned. She was wearing her green satin kimono—the one with the coffee stains that Jake had tried like hell to get out. The lamplight made a little halo around her head. He wondered how long she'd been there.

"How was dinner?" he asked.

She looked up from her book. "Oh . . . my dear. It was lovely. Marguerite made . . . what do you call them?"

Jake shrugged. She was always asking shit like this.

"Oh, you know . . . those little potato dumplings . . ."

"Au gratin."

"No . . . they're Italian. You know."

"Nucky? I can't pronounce it—"

“Yes, yes . . . close enough.” Anna smiled. “That’s what they were.” She took off her purple reading glasses and folded them up, tucking them efficiently into the sleeve of her kimono. “How was your evening, dear?”

Jake surprised himself by coming clean: “I met somebody.”

“Ah.” It was amazing how much she could pack into that sound.

“It’s not like that.”

“I see.” She switched off the lamp to relieve her eyes. “Then what is it like?”

“Who the hell knows? It’s no big whoop. We’re just gonna eat out on Forbes Island.”

“Should I know where that is?”

“It’s this . . . floating island thing next to Pier 39.”

She nodded slowly, wordlessly, at the mention of the dreaded tourist trap. “Well,” she said finally. “That side of town can be lovely.”

8

Signing

Shawna was dawdling over a plate of fried artichoke hearts at Pier 23 Café, a funky waterfront roadhouse she had loved ever since her dad took her there for her thirteenth birthday. These days, it was a handy waiting room when Otto had a gig at Pier 39. She could avoid the tourists, have a beer or two, and be pleasantly pissed by the time her inamorato was done with his clowning. Otto enjoyed the walk from Pier 39—the release it offered from all those people—and Shawna liked how she felt (not to mention how she looked) amid the film-noir grittiness of the café. Tonight, as a freighter droned dolefully on the black satin bay, she was glad she hadn't cut her Bettie bangs just yet.

“Excuse me, I know you must hate this . . .”

Shawna looked up to find what she expected: a typical fan of her blog—early twenties, male, slightly geeky—approaching her with extreme care, as if she were a skittish creature in a forest. Or maybe some bad-ass dominatrix.

“You’re Grrrl on the Loose, right?”

She smiled, giving her stock answer: “That’s the blog, not me.”

“Good title, though.”

“I don’t know. Those three *rs* are getting tired, aren’t they? I may have to put them to bed.” She gave him a friendly, jaundiced glance. “Hope you’ll still read me.”

“My girlfriend loved your piece on eco-friendly sex toys. This is her.” He pulled the poor woman forward to present her. “You friended her on Facebook.”

“Ah . . . right.” *You and five thousand other people*, she thought as she shook the woman’s hand. “Nice to see you in the flesh.”

The couple laughed nervously, as though Shawna's off-handed response had been riddled with innuendo. Why did they always expect her to be dirty? She prided herself on writing about sex in a healthy, joyful, unapologetic way, but people were determined to cast her as the Duchess of Smut. That was still on her mind when Otto strode into the café. As she waved him down, an idea was assembling in her head.

"That for me?" he asked, eyeing the beer she'd bought for him.

"If you play your cards right."

He grinned and gulped half the glass before sitting down.

"How were the hordes?" she asked.

"Hordey." He took off his backpack—the one that held the monkey puppet and some of his clothes—and set it on the floor beside him. He'd made an effort to clean up, but there were still traces of clown white in his smile lines, and his big, honey-colored mane was a matted, scraggly mess. "Picked up some cash, though."

"Cool."

Otto snatched an artichoke heart and popped it into his mouth.

"You wanna order something?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I had a burger at the pier. Mostly I wanna go back to your place and cuddle the fuck out of you."

"Okay." She smiled crookedly, loving the sentiment in spite of his wording. "I wanna ask you something first."

"Shoot."

"You know how lately I've been sort of disenchanted with the blog?"

"Not really."

"Well . . . I have. I think it's kinda run its course. I mean, I think I've done some good, but I'm tired of being Debbie Dildo, you know?"

Otto shrugged. "You're good at it."

"Thanks, but . . . it gets to be limiting after a while. I think I wanna open it up, talk about life in general . . . you know, the petty shit and the big issues we all have to deal with. Something substantive. I think my readers would follow me, and I would really—"

"Go for it. What's stopping you?"

"Well . . . I need you to tell me it's okay."

"Why?"

"Because I might be writing about us. In part, at least."

“Oh.” A cloud passed over his face. “Like . . . using my name and all?”

“Yeah, unless . . .” She decided to keep it light. “You’re not wanted for something in ten states, are you?”

He wouldn’t pick up on the gag. “I like my privacy, Shawna. I love what we have, but . . . I don’t know about sharing it with strangers.”

“You just performed on a pier with a ton of strangers.”

“No,” he said quietly. “That was Ottokar. Or Sammy sometimes. But it wasn’t me. That’s why I’m able to do it.”

That made sense, in a way, but she suspected his fears ran deeper than that. “I wouldn’t be writing about our sex life,” she said. “I wouldn’t be as . . . specific as—”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?” She was starting to feel hurt, and, worse yet, sounding that way. “Are we just not . . . that serious?”

Otto saw her mortification and grabbed her hand across the table. “Listen, ladylove . . . if we weren’t serious I wouldn’t give a shit *what* you put in that blog. I just don’t want to feel self-conscious about what we have. I don’t want to be weighing my words all the time. I don’t want to think of us as . . . you know . . . material.”

Anyone else who’d called her “ladylove” would have received, at the very least, a derisive snort, but Shawna found it sort of sweet. It was possible Otto had picked up that expression the summer he worked as a knight at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, but she preferred to believe it had sprung, freshly minted, from his uncorrupted heart.

She decided not to press him further about the blog. He didn’t read it anyway, and they weren’t on record as being a couple. She could call him her boo or something similarly vague and still do the kind of writing she wanted to do. He was right about the potential for self-consciousness in such an enterprise. It was better just to let the words flow, as she always had, and let Otto be Otto. The less he knew the better, really.

On the way home to the Mission, they were stopped at a light under the freeway overpass when a homeless woman in a dirty red tracksuit approached the car with a ragged cardboard sign that read YOUR MAMA WOULD GIVE A DAMN. Shawna wondered how well that actually worked, if most people saw their mothers as pillars of generosity and

therefore felt inspired to give. It was original, anyway, and it made her smile.

She dug around in her bag for a loose bill, with no success. Otto saw what she was doing and pulled out his wallet. "Is five enough?"

"Make it twenty," she said. "I'll pay you back."

"She's a junkie. See those sores on her neck."

"And your point is?"

"I'm just sayin'."

Shawna rolled down the window and held out the twenty. The woman took it without a word, then pulled up the leg of her sweatpants so she could stash the offering in her sock. Shawna caught a glimpse of putrid gray flesh, a constellation of sores. The woman's face, by contrast, was a fiery red-brown, sun-ravaged and grimy. She looked to be anywhere between thirty and sixty. The awful agelessness of the streets.

"The world is fucked," the woman announced.

"You got that right, sister."

The woman cackled, showing broken teeth and rotten gums. "You got you a man in there?"

"I do," said Shawna, casting her eyes toward Otto. "I got me a man in here."

The woman leaned down and spoke through the window. "You be nice to her, ya hear?"

Otto looked flustered, so Shawna jumped in: "He is. He's very nice to me."

"I had me one for a while."

"A man, you mean?" Shawna couldn't help grinning. The woman might as well have been talking about a parakeet.

"Yep," said the woman. "When I was about your age."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I was prettier'n you, too."

"I'm sure you were" was all Shawna could think to say.

"A whole *lot* prettier."

"Hey, watch it," Shawna said jovially, "or I'll take my money back."

"You do, bitch, and I'll cut you."

Otto was obviously aghast, but Shawna caught the twinkle lurking deep in the woman's red-rimmed eyes. "Not if I smack the shit out of you first,"

she said.

This elicited another cackle. "You're all right, kid."

"I don't know about *that*."

"Nah. You're my kinda lady. Nothin' scares you, does it?"

It was an interesting question. "Not the usual things, I guess."

"Good for you. Us girls gotta be brave."

"I guess we do, yeah."

The woman raised her grimy fist in a show of solidarity with Shawna before trudging farther down the traffic island in search of another handout.

"How does it get that bad?" Shawna asked Otto.

He just shrugged. "Heroin."

"That can't be all of it."

"You'd have to ask her."

The light changed and Shawna drove away. She felt a shameful rush of relief as the woman grew ever smaller in the rearview mirror. *That's why the homeless beg at stoplights*, she thought. *It's as much for us as it is for them. We're shielded from the horror by glass and steel, and we can make a clean break as soon as the light changes.*

"She was nice," Shawna offered.

"It's her routine. It's part of signing."

"Signing?"

"That's what they call it. When they hold out those signs."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I work the streets, too."

She snorted. "The mean streets of Pier 39."

"She's living for the next fix, so she does what she has to do."

And we drive on, thought Shawna. *We drive on and do nothing.*

"What's the matter?" asked Otto.

"Nothing. Everything. She said it herself: the world is fucked."

"You wanna go back? Offer her a hot shower and a place to sleep?"

Otto knew the answer to that already.

"I could write about her," Shawna said feebly.

Otto gave her a sly sideways smile. "And who would that help?"

She turned her eyes back to the road. "Bite me, clown boy."

Lady Parts

The cottage seemed even smaller on the inside, which was fine with Mary Ann. The last thing she needed was room for rattling around. She'd had that in spades back in Darien, and that cavern of a house, minus husband and stepson, only amplified her despair. She wanted to feel cozy now—confined, even—and here, in this doll's house of a room, with the guys just across the garden, she could be alone but not alone.

She was touched to see how they'd prepared for her arrival: a Mason jar of pink tea roses by the bed and a little wooden crate of artisanal goat soap on the dresser. There was even a Quan Yin—a jade one with a sweet smile—though that might have always been there. She set down her suitcase with an appreciative sigh. “Perfect.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Hardly.”

She turned and laid her head against his chest. “No, Mouse . . . I appreciate it more than you can know.” He patted her shoulder awkwardly. She wondered how much trouble she had caused. Ben had *seemed* all right about it, but it was sometimes hard to read the emotions behind that gap-toothed Huck Finn smile.

“You can put your suitcase there,” Michael said, indicating the only patch of unoccupied floor in the room. “And there's a rod in the bathroom where you can hang stuff. If there's not enough room, let me know. We can hang it in the house.”

She assured him she was fine, that she planned to live as simply as possible during her stay, that all she needed was access to their washer and dryer and maybe a shelf in their refrigerator. It felt good, actually, to pare down her life like this.

“We're vegetarian these days,” Michael told her.

“You *are*? Since when?”

“Six weeks, maybe.”

“You never mentioned it.”

He shrugged. “I don’t wanna be an asshole about it.”

As long as she’d known him, Michael had been a bacon-double-cheeseburger kind of guy. This had to be Ben’s influence. “Do you just . . . disapprove of meat?”

“It disapproves of me. I asked Ben to take me to this Brazilian steakhouse on Market Street for my birthday, and we ate, like, half a barnyard—cows, chickens, pigs, *and* their internal organs—and three days later I had a major attack of gout.”

“Gout?” The word sounded so archaic. “Like Henry the Eighth?”

“Yeah . . . most of those bloated old British kings. And Mel Brooks, for God’s sake! At least that’s what Wikipedia says. I’m in elegant company.”

She smiled. “How does it . . . you know, manifest itself?”

“Mine was in my big toe. It felt like broken glass under the skin. It hurt whenever my toe touched the sheet. So I figured it was time to change my diet.”

“I remember when you ate nothing *but* meat for years. Meat and cheese and strawberries with heavy cream.”

“The Atkins Diet,” said Michael. “The gateway to gout. The thing is, I was already starting to get grossed out by the idea of animal flesh. I was chopping chicken breasts into smaller and smaller pieces. And I saw this documentary where they were prodding a half-dead cow with a forklift, and it just revolted me. So . . . I thought I should listen to that. Plus Ben and I both have high cholesterol, so vegan made sense.”

“*Vegan*? I thought you said vegetarian?”

“Ben’s doing vegan. I have to have my cheese. And I buy those cartons of egg whites. We’re not fanatical about it. We can stock up on meat for you, if that’s what you’d like. We can go to Trader Joe’s together and get what you need.”

She wasn’t prepared to commit to vegetarianism, even briefly, so she kept it vague. “You know me. I’m happy with my yogurt and half a sandwich.”

“That’s why you’re still so skinny and pretty.”

It was such a lovely thing to say, and there was really no way to keep the tears back. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "I swear it won't be like this."

"Oh, c'mon."

"What?"

"Of course it's gonna be like this. We're saying good-bye to your uterus. We'll need a few tears for that if we're gonna have a proper send-off."

He had summed up the situation with his usual charming candor, but it was the sound of "we" that made her terrible burden suddenly seem lighter. *We'll need a few tears for that.* She had almost forgotten the sweet solace of the first-person plural.

She kept things light to keep from crying again. "Don't tell me there's a ritual or something."

"For what?"

"Sending off your uterus."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, twelve crones in purple robes smear your body with patchouli oil and dance the sacred Farewell Womb Dance. Jesus, woman!"

She laughed. "Well, you never know. Not around here."

"You've been in Connecticut too long."

"Tell me about it." She pecked him on the cheek. "Go to work, Mouse. I'm gonna settle in. Maybe take a nap." She was already savoring the thought of snoozing on those sun-warmed sheets while hummingbirds idled in the window.

"I left the house open," Michael added, "in case you wanna hang out there. Watch TV, read a book or something. Just lock up if you decide to head out. You know the neighborhood. There's shopping in both directions . . . down on 24th or the Castro." He paused, considering something. "You're okay with walking, right?"

She nodded. "I'm not feeling anything so far . . . if that's what you mean."

"I guess that *is* what I meant." He fell tellingly silent for a moment. "So you've got the doctor lined up and all?"

"I did. I mean . . . my doctor in Darien hooked me up with somebody at Mount Zion but . . . he's not gonna work out."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "He's got a penis."

Michael absorbed that. "You want a lady handling the lady parts."

"Is that silly?"

"Not at all. I totally get it."

She'd felt sure he would say that, but it helped to hear it anyway. "I thought I might call DeDe and D'or," she told him. "See if they can recommend somebody."

"I dunno." A mischievous glint came into his eye. "That could very well involve twelve crones in purple with patchouli oil."

"C'mon, Mouse. They're the least New-Agey lesbians I know."

"How many lesbians do you know these days?"

He had always loved teasing her like this, making her seem more out of it than she actually was. It was part of their ancient ritual. "We have lesbians in Darien," she told him. "There's one on the board of the country club. She's a Bush Republican."

He smirked. "So to speak."

To her amazement, she heard herself giggling. Michael could still do that for her, she realized, still make her feel that giddy release. For a fleeting moment, they might have been back at Barbary Lane, holed up together in his room on a dateless Saturday night, wisecracking their troubles away. And how minuscule those troubles had been.

Michael pecked her on the cheek. "I'm outta here."

"Go. Make pretty things grow."

As he crossed the doorstep he pulled out the key and handed it to her with a decidedly tentative look. "Maybe I shouldn't bring this up."

She felt an instant tightening in her belly. "Go ahead."

"You know Shawna's back from New York, right?"

Mary Ann had guessed as much from Shawna's Web site, where recent entries had focused on San Francisco. She avoided Shawna's blog, for the most part, since she was put off by the material. The last time she checked, Shawna was writing about a high-end spa somewhere back East that offered sperm facials to its clients. (And not in the crude vernacular sense, either—actual facials made of sperm from who-the-hell-knows-where.) Mary Ann didn't need this information from anyone, much less from the only Shawna she had ever known, the little girl with whom she'd sing along to Billy Joel on the drive home from Presidio Hill School. It was too much for her. She

was far from being a prude; she just couldn't make the trip from there to here.

And it worried her sometimes that Shawna might suddenly decide to get personal in the blog. There was already an autobiographical element to her work, and sooner or later she would get around to her rocky childhood and the selfish adoptive mother who left when she was five. Shawna saw herself as an artist, and that's what artists did.

"I had a feeling she was here," she told Michael.

"Do you want me to say anything about . . . what's going on with you?"

"No . . . please. I don't want her to feel she has to do anything." She flashed on the hideously uncomfortable afternoon she had spent with Shawna in Darien. Shawna had taken the train from the city and had made an earnest effort at bridging the gap, but they had both begun to squirm before the day was over. They were different people with different histories and no valid reason, biological or otherwise, to relate to each other.

"Should I tell Anna?"

"I'd rather you not tell anyone, Mouse. Not until it's over, anyway."

"No problem. She probably knows you're here, though."

"Why?"

"Because Jake already knows . . . and Jake rooms with Anna."

"Oh . . . right." *This town*, she thought, *this tiny little town*.

"I'll keep the details quiet, though."

"Thanks, Mouse."

"Get some rest. I'll be back by six. Ben wants to cook for us."

She watched him shamble across the garden to his truck, a portly silver-haired figure in faded green overalls, the closest thing she had to a knight in shining armor.

She asked herself, in light of her history, if she was once again running to a man for her salvation, but the question evaporated almost as soon as it materialized.

After unpacking, she took a quick shower, put on her pajamas and crawled into bed, sleeping lightly for an hour or so, drifting in and out of consciousness to the white noise of lawn mowers and distant car alarms. There were moments, as she lay still like that, when she thought she could feel something pernicious stirring inside of her, announcing its presence.

The doctor had said she might not feel anything prior to the surgery, so this could well be a product of her own neurosis, a morbid variation on hysterical pregnancy.

Or not.

She recognized the irony of equating her cancer to a pregnancy, since women who had never given birth were more likely to contract the disease. *Use it or lose it* was the phrase that had popped into her mind when the doctor explained this to her, though she hadn't dared say it out loud. It was too on the nose, too terribly true, to be spoken.

It would be easy enough to blame her childlessness on Brian, her first husband, since his sperm, for some reason, wasn't capable of making babies, but the truth was she had never felt the urge to raise a child. Her temperament just wasn't suited for it, and (to her credit, she thought) she had admitted that limitation more freely than most women. If her old high school friend Connie hadn't died giving birth to Shawna, Mary Ann could have passed up motherhood altogether and been none the worse for it. But Brian was over the moon about this freak shot at fatherhood, so she had bowed to his dream.

Restless now, she got out of bed and went to the toilet. She ordered herself not to look at her pee but found herself doing so anyway. There was a wriggly thread of red running through it, like a worm embedded in amber. She shuddered and shucked off her pajamas, heading straight to the shower again, as if she could just wash it away. She was sorely ignorant about all of this, and that ignorance, she realized, had been her legacy.

In her mother's day, a hysterectomy had been an act of stealth, a "woman's problem" to be whispered about, and then, of course, only among women. To Mary Ann the very sound of the word—hisssterectomy—had suggested a secret uttered under the breath. There was shame involved when a woman lost her God-given purpose in life, so (even after having two kids) Mary Ann's mom had told everyone she knew that she was visiting her older sister in Baltimore. Mary Ann's dad had stayed home with the kids for four days, feeding them TV dinners and pacing the family room like a caged panther.

When her mom finally returned, looking sorrowful and weak, Mary Ann had assumed this was the awkward aftermath of a brief marital breakup. That explanation had made the most sense to her, given her

father's panic in her mother's absence, and the fact that both of them had been yelling a lot more than usual. Mary Ann had fretted over them until the following summer at their cabin in Michigan when, one night before bed, the truth was finally passed down, mother-to-daughter, like treasured heirloom jewelry.

How, then, could she draw on the memory of her mother's experience, when she'd been kept in the dark about it? She had no way of knowing if her mom had felt this fragile in her own body, or how extensive her cancer had been, or if it had even been cancer. Like so many bodily mysteries in Mary Ann's life, she would just have to wing it. There was no practical wisdom to be gleaned from her Greatest Generation mom, the woman who had once described periods to her preteen daughter as "the bitter tears of a disappointed womb."

Back in the bedroom, Mary Ann found DeDe Halcyon-Wilson on her BlackBerry and dialed the number. DeDe answered on the second ring.

"Well, hello there. This is a nice surprise."

She'd known DeDe for a long time. She had worked for DeDe's dad at his advertising agency and, several years later, had broken the story when DeDe and her lover D'orothea escaped from Jonestown via Cuba with their twin children in tow. The story had launched Mary Ann's television career and forged a bond between her and the ex-socialite heiress that had proven resilient despite years of neglect and a continent between them. They had remained firmly on each other's Christmas card list and had accidentally reunited several years earlier at a charity golf tournament in Boca Raton. Stuffy old Bob hadn't known what to make of the Halcyon-Wilsons with their Hillary buttons and their easy elegance, but Mary Ann had received them like long-lost sisters.

It felt like that now, she realized, only stronger. "Oh, God, DeDe, it's so good to hear your voice."

"Same here, missy. Hang on . . . lemme get D'or. She's out in the garden with the grandkids."

"*Grandkids?*"

"I know. Tragic, isn't it? Where did the time go?" A certain breathlessness in DeDe's voice told Mary Ann that she was already loping through the garden. Mary Ann could picture that garden easily, or at least

how it had looked thirty years earlier when DeDe's mother, then doyenne of Halcyon Hill, had summoned Mary Ann to the estate to break the news of her daughter's socially embarrassing return from the dead. DeDe and D'or and the kids had just arrived in Miami in a boatload of gay Cuban refugees.

And now those kids had kids! "Who do they belong to?" she asked DeDe. "The grandkids, I mean."

"Both of them. Anna and Sergei have two of their own, and Edgar and Stephen adopted a seven-year-old last year. Where the hell is she? D'or! There you are. Get your svelte butt over here! It's Mary Ann! Yeah, *that* Mary Ann."

All this joyful fanfare—and the squeals of children in the background—made Mary Ann wonder if she should do this on the telephone. But she couldn't afford another moment's delay if she was going to change doctors in midstream.

"DeDe, listen, I wanna come visit you guys, but I need—"

"Mary Ann! Girlfriend!" D'or was on the phone now, apparently in the very midst of all those screaming children. "It's a friend, Milo . . . no, nobody you know . . . go play with Juniper . . . she needs you at the space station. I'm sorry, Mary Ann. How the hell are you? *Where* the hell are you?"

"I'm here," she responded feebly.

"In Hillsborough?"

"No, up in the city."

"Is Bob with you?"

"No, that's part of why . . . listen, it's wonderful to hear your voice, but . . . could you maybe ask DeDe to take the phone to a quieter place? There's something kind of important I need to—"

"Gotcha. No sweat. Talk to you later, doll. Whatever it is, we'll fix it."

If only.

When the sun dipped behind Twin Peaks, she went for a walk around the neighborhood, mostly to lift her spirits. Like Russian Hill, this side of town was etched with bowered stairs and secret alleys, and she'd always been a pushover for that kind of charm. Back in Connecticut, whenever she'd grown homesick—or whatever the word might be—it wouldn't be the bridge or the pyramid or the cable cars that would call her back to San

Francisco; it would be the raw *essence* of the place, its DNA, something that was everywhere but nowhere: a snippet of bay filigreed with trees, or a row of houses on a fogbound hillside, glowing like fairy lights buried in angel hair.

She made herself wander for an hour. She tried to pretend that her pain wasn't portable, that she was still capable of starting over, still the sort of woman who could be saved by geography. Never mind that it hadn't saved her for many years. Not on her trips to Paris or Prague or St. Barts. Not during her six months in cooking school in Tuscany or even her volunteer work with Habitat in New Orleans after Katrina. A mess who traveled was, ultimately, just a traveling mess. Travel might be broadening for a while, but sooner or later it just narrowed your illusions about what you could be.

On the way home she stopped to catch her breath on the steep street flanking Michael and Ben's house. There was an old guy across the street who was doing the same thing, so she felt a moment of senior solidarity with him, though he was much older than she was and didn't notice her standing there. He seemed to be admiring the new cottage, the one where she was living now, and that somehow made her happy. She considered engaging him but settled on solitude, holding back until he was gone.

A Force for Good

Pasta made the most sense, Ben decided, since they were cooking for Mary Ann that night, and it was best not to overwhelm her with one of his all-veggie extravaganzas. Nobody thought pasta was weird. He could make a nice penne dish with a little Gimme Lean sausage and his basil-and-cashew pesto. He had Googled “vegan + uterine cancer” at his Norfolk Street workspace that morning to find what he had expected: a documented correlation between cancer and animal-food consumption. A vegan diet could not in itself cure cancer, the experts said, but it could limit the places where cancer could live. That was good to know if Mary Ann’s cancer had yet to spread beyond her uterus.

Leaving his workspace with Roman just after four, he drove to the Whole Foods on Potrero Hill and shopped for dinner. (Michael, like many, had always called this market “Whole Paycheck,” which was certainly true enough, but Ben couldn’t resist the scope of its organic inventory.) When Ben returned to the parking garage, Roman was sitting up in the front seat with a look of quizzical pathos on his face.

“What is it, Mr. Doodle? You wanna go to the park?”

The dog reacted with disproportionate glee, panting his reply.

“No,” said Ben, sensing a misunderstanding, “not the beach . . . the *park*.”

Roman just looked puzzled now.

“You like the park. All your friends are there. Don’t you wanna see Mercy? And Blossom and Cliff? And Crazy Amy Winehouse Lady?”

Ben knew he was babbling like a lunatic—to a dog, no less—but he felt no shame about it. Most people were babbling these days, some of them into a headset, others just tweeting into the void, into the gray ether of

faceless strangers. At least he knew Roman was listening. At least he knew Roman was trying his best to understand.

That's what Ben liked about the dog park. It was nothing if not a constant effort at direct communication. Even the people there were actively engaged in the practice. Today, for instance, seven or eight of them had pulled their white plastic chairs into a circle and were shooting the breeze like old men on the porch of a country store. All of them, in fact, *were* male, and most of them could easily fit someone's definition of old. Not a problem for Ben, of course, except that one of them, a writer named Gabriel Noone, who told stories on NPR, had come on to Ben in the locker room at the Y, and Ben, put off by the guy's needy posturing, had politely declined. Better to go it alone today.

So he sat on one of the benches against the fence while Roman went nuts with a scrappy Boston terrier. He didn't remain alone for long, however, because Cliff came into the park with Blossom, spotted Ben and Roman, and began making his way slowly toward the bench. The old man was wearing a faded green car coat that Ben recognized from previous visits. He used its many pockets to store dog treats, tennis balls and assorted squeaky toys—all for the enjoyment of Blossom and her friends.

Seeing Cliff, Roman parted company with the Boston terrier and made a beeline for the old man's pocket. "Well, look at ol' Roman come running."

"Make him sit for it, Cliff. Don't let him jump on you."

"Okay then, sit," the old man told Roman. "No . . . stay . . . sit. That's a good boy. You want another?"

"Just one more," Ben said. "Otherwise he'll never leave you alone."

The dog was sitting attentively, waiting for the next bonanza, when a nerve-jangling scream made him jerk his head toward Collingwood Street. At that end of the park the cyclone fence was four times taller than elsewhere and covered with canvas panels, not only to keep balls from escaping but presumably to shield the neighbors from the undesirable sight of dogs at play. It was therefore impossible to find the source of the scream—even when another one came, followed by a string of explosive words:

"I'M ONTO YOU, YOU FUCKIN' MISERABLE PIECE OF SHIT! YOU THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY FROM ME, MOTHERFUCKER? YOU COCKSUCKING SORRY-ASS EXCUSE FOR A HUMAN BEING!"

“Uh-oh,” said Cliff, cocking an eyebrow at Ben. “She’s back.”

“Who is it?”

“Some schizo. She comes by here from time to time. Her brain is fried. I’m surprised you’ve never seen her.”

“Or *heard* her, at least.”

“THAT’S RIGHT YOU, YOU FUCKIN’ BASTARD. I’M ONTO YOU. THE WORM WILL TURN, YOU SCUMMY SON OF A BITCH! THE WORM WILL TURN! EAT SHIT AND DIE, MOTHERFUCKER! YOU HEAR THAT?”

By now Roman had abandoned the treats altogether and moved between Ben’s legs for protection. The men in the circle of chairs all had nervous smirks on their faces, but they were obviously trying not to look toward the big canvas wall.

“Who’s she talking to?” Ben asked.

The old man shrugged. “Somebody in her head, I suppose. Whatever you do, don’t make eye contact or she’ll try to come in. She’s got a hunting knife strapped to her leg. I’ve seen her pull it on people.”

“I can’t see her anyway,” said Ben.

“Nah, look . . . she’s pulled the canvas back.”

Ben shot a quick furtive glance in that direction. The sidewalk was lower than the fence at that point, so all he could see was the woman’s head and upper body: a beet-red fist of a face above what appeared to be a filthy red tracksuit.

Then she dropped the canvas and disappeared from sight again.

Ben had an armful of groceries when he returned to the house, so, as soon as the door was open, Roman wriggled past him and bolted toward the human who was dozing in the window seat. He licked her face extravagantly, causing her to wake with a small cry of alarm. “Roman, no!” Ben yelped, though the damage was already done.

Mary Ann sat up, swiping at her face. “It’s okay,” she said. “That’s more action than I’ve had in months.” She had changed into sweats, Ben noticed, and her face was completely free of makeup. Her short silver hair suited the shape of her head, he thought, and her fine-boned prettiness had carried her gracefully to the brink of sixty.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have been here.”

“Why not?”

“I have my own perfect little house, for heaven’s sake.” She reached for one of the grocery bags. “Let me help with that.”

“No,” he said. “I’ve got it. And you sleep wherever you want.”

She followed him into the kitchen. “Let me help unload, at least.”

“Sure,” he said, since her need to feel useful was obvious. He wondered, somewhat guiltily, if she had sensed his reluctance about this new living arrangement. “The pantry’s right there,” he told her. “All of this packaged stuff goes on the top two roller shelves. It’s sort of free-for-all, so don’t worry about placement.”

“Man after my own heart,” Mary Ann replied with strained jocularity. She removed the pasta bags and packaged soups from the canvas carryall and began to transfer them to the pantry. They were both silent for a while, grateful for the chance to bury their awkwardness in mindless activity.

Finally, Ben said: “I’m sorry about . . . all of it.”

She gave him a wan smile. “Thanks.”

“I think you’re being remarkably strong.”

“Either that. Or I’m in shock.”

“Have you found a doctor?”

“Not yet. I’ve got a friend working on it.”

“Do you have many of those here?”

“What? Friends?” She shook her head. “Not anymore. I mean . . . it’s been a long time. I wouldn’t even know how to find them.”

“You should get on Facebook.”

“Oh . . . God no, Ben. I hate the Internet.”

“Why?”

“People get so ugly. I used to read the *Chronicle* online back in Darien, just to . . . you know . . . because I liked seeing the names of familiar places. But I was always tempted to read the . . . What’s that part where the readers write in?”

“The comment board?”

“Yeah. They’re so depressing. All those bitter people gloating about someone else’s death or calling someone ugly or just being really hideous to each other. I couldn’t handle it. It wasn’t the San Francisco I remembered.”

Ben handed her a bundle of kale. “That’s because they’re from Chico.”

She laughed. “Not all of them, surely. Where does this go?”

“Bottom bin in the fridge. The thing about Facebook is that it’s friendly. Most people use their real names, and you can block anyone who’s being an asshole. In my experience people are usually nice . . . even a little bit corny sometimes.”

She squatted to stuff the kale into the vegetable bin, then looked up at him with a crooked smile. “Perfect for the old lady, in other words.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t mean *you* were corny. I just thought you might enjoy the experience. It brings back the past like you wouldn’t believe. All sorts of people.”

“That’s just it. Do I really want that?”

“Why not?”

She stood up again. “I’ve pretty much kept the friends I wanted to keep. If you lose someone along the way, there’s usually a good reason, isn’t there?”

“What about fans, then? There must be a lot of them.”

“*Fans?*”

“Michael says you were a big star here back in the day.”

She rolled her eyes conspicuously, but he could tell that she was pleased. “I had a local show. I was . . . you know . . . somebody for a while, but ‘star’ is pushing it.” She paused for a moment, then asked: “What’s this about, Ben?”

He was asking himself the same question. Sure, he was trying to lift her spirits, but his other motive was undeniably self-serving. Mary Ann might not be so dependent on Michael, Ben figured, if she had a wider network of supportive friends.

“I just thought you’d enjoy it,” he said. “It’s been fun for me, and—”

“I wouldn’t even know how to do it. I’d probably—”

“Well, that part’s easy. I could set it up for you in a few minutes. If you wanna use my computer, you could . . .” He cut himself off, suddenly wary of overselling it. “Sorry, I get like this. Just tell me to shut up.”

She smiled and began folding the empty canvas bags on the butcher-block island. The act was so methodical and matter-of-fact that she might have always been tidying things away in this kitchen. “Where do these go?” she asked.

“Just leave them. I keep them in the car.”

She arranged the bags in a stack and gave them a nervous pat to indicate that she was done. Without looking up, she said: "I know how invasive this is."

He was thrown, so he feigned confusion. "What?"

"Me being here. Leaching off your happiness."

Now she was gazing directly at him, waiting for his response. Where had this come from anyway? Could Michael have said something to her?

"C'mon," he said finally. "You're not leaching off anything. We're happy to have you."

"No, Ben, that's sweet, but . . . I'm sort of borrowing your husband."

He shrugged. "Then make sure to give him back."

She laughed. "Well . . . okay . . . deal."

He picked up a tub of Earth Balance and tucked it into the butter bin on the refrigerator door. "I get it, Mary Ann. I know why you need him."

She seemed to study him for a moment. "Where on earth did he find you?"

He gave her a heavy-lidded smile.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "The Internet."

"I'm telling you, it's a force for good."

"I'm not looking for a man, if that's what you're thinking."

"I didn't think you were."

"Could you set it up on my laptop?"

"Set up what? Oh . . . sure." He was amazed how quickly she'd capitulated. "Of course."

"Is now a good time?" she asked.

Ben felt an unexpected sense of accomplishment when Mary Ann broke the news to Michael over dinner that night.

"Ben got me going on Facebook, Mouse."

Michael set down his fork and looked at Ben. "No shit."

"I thought she'd enjoy it," Ben said evenly, wondering if Michael, for one reason or another, might think this was a bad idea.

"It was kind of liberating," said Mary Ann. "I used my maiden name and listed myself as single on the profile. They had a box that said 'It's Complicated,' but it really wasn't complicated at all, so I just said single. It was like a quickie Mexican divorce."

Michael grunted. "That guy deserves a quickie Mexican hit man."

Ben was jarred by this response, and it must have showed.

"I mean it," said Michael, stabbing his salad as if there were vermin hiding in it. "I've been thinking about it. No fate is too cruel for that douche nozzle."

Mary Ann smiled at the terminology. Ben recognized it as one of Jake's expressions, so Michael must have just been saving it for the right occasion.

"You know what you should do?" said Michael. "You should talk about the Skype thing on Facebook."

Mary Ann winced. "Right, Mouse. Why not share my humiliation with the world?" She turned to Ben. "He told you about that, I guess."

Ben nodded.

Michael said: "I don't mean mention it directly. Just the occasional veiled reference. So he knows that you know."

"I'm sure he's not on Facebook," said Mary Ann.

"Yeah, but his friends might be."

A stifled groan from Mary Ann.

"I'm just sayin'. You could have some fun with it. Make 'em sweat a little."

"Sweetheart," said Ben, admonishing his husband with a look. Michael had a way of working a gag until it screamed bloody murder.

"The thing is," said Mary Ann, "I'm not even positive that he doesn't *already* know that I know."

"What do you mean?" asked Ben.

She shrugged. "He could have done it on purpose."

Michael looked annoyed. "Well, of course he did it on purpose!"

"I mean, left the Skype on."

"No!" Michael looked genuinely aghast.

"Bob's not good at confrontation," she said. "Not about the tough stuff. He might have just decided to show me rather than tell me."

"C'mon, babycakes. No one could be that vile. Hadn't you just told him you might be pregnant?"

Ben wasn't sure he'd heard this correctly. "I'm sorry . . . what?"

"My cancer symptoms," Mary Ann explained quietly, looking at Ben. "I didn't know what was happening yet."

He still wasn't sure what she meant, so he nodded and left it alone. He could see from her face that the conversation was beginning to get to her.

"Anyhoo," said Mary Ann, chirping away the darkness, "I have twenty-six friends already."

Michael seemed confused. "Oh . . . on Facebook, you mean."

"Yeah. Ben friended me, and some of his friends recognized my name from my TV days."

"That's because they're old," said Michael.

Mary Ann batted her eyes in half-serious indignation. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't mean it that way."

"What other way could you mean it?"

Though Michael didn't deserve it, Ben let him off the hook. "He was being jealous," he told Mary Ann. "That comment was for me, not you."

"His Facebook friends are older gentlemen with facial hair . . ."

Ben grinned at Mary Ann. "He's exaggerating. A few of them maybe . . ."

" . . . and they all look like me . . . fleshy features, big bellies. It's totally unsettling."

"So?" said Mary Ann with a shrug. "You're his type. What's so unsettling about that?"

"Thank you," Ben mumbled through a mouthful of bread.

"It would be much more unsettling," Mary Ann added, "if they were all cute little twinkies or something."

"Don't be so sure," said Michael. "Now that I know what his type is I have to worry about whether I'm the best version of that type. Not to mention what will happen when . . . you know, I'm no longer that type."

Mary Ann rolled her eyes so Ben could see it. "He's always been like this, you know."

Ben nodded. "I kinda figured."

"When things are going great, he finds a way to make it not count."

"Hey," said Michael. "Gang up on me, why don't you?"

"I'm not saying a word," said Ben, exchanging a private smirk with Mary Ann.

It was a moment of bonding he had not really expected.

An Underlying Agenda

So here they were, at last—sitting underwater on a floating island in San Francisco Bay—a wack place to eat dinner if ever there was one. But something about the way the waiter had just crooned the word “gentlemen” as he handed them their menus had turned their excellent adventure into an embarrassing dinner date.

Or so it seemed to Jake. He wondered if Jonah was feeling the same discomfort over the assumption that they were a couple. It was Jonah, after all, who’d insisted on this goofy outing to Forbes Island, so he was the one whose motives were suspect. At first Jake had written off the evening as a boyish whim, but now there was something brightly expectant in Jonah’s eyes that hinted at an underlying agenda.

“May I show you our wine list?” the waiter asked, while a solitary, bewhiskered fish idled in the murk beyond the porthole.

Jake glanced at Jonah, who shook his head. “I’m good with ice water.”

“Same here,” said Jake, relieved that he’d been spared the ordeal of wine selection. He was sure that duty would have fallen to him, since he was the one with the beard, and Jonah, weirdly enough, seemed even younger than his twenty-two years now that he was spiffed up in a blue blazer and a white shirt.

When the waiter had left, Jonah pulled an iPhone from the breast pocket of his blazer and summoned a photograph. “That’s Becky,” he said, showing it to Jake.

The girl was a toothy brunette with flat, shiny hair. She was standing in front of a sign that read HOME OF THE LOBOS.

“Smokin’,” said Jake, though she wasn’t especially.

Jonah returned the phone to his blazer. "She works at the chamber of commerce. We've been together since high school. How 'bout you?"

"How 'bout me what?"

Jonah smiled. "Is there a girl in your life?"

Jake hesitated, looking for a way to be as truthfully misleading as possible. "There used to be," he said at last, "but no more."

The kid frowned in sympathy. "That's too bad."

"Thanks, but . . . it wasn't a good fit."

Jonah nodded solemnly. "You'll find the right one."

"So where's the chamber of commerce? Where your girlfriend works. What town?"

"Oh . . . teeny tiny little place. Snowflake, Arizona. About six thousand souls."

"Where it snows a lot."

"Well . . . a fair amount, but that's not the reason. It was founded by a guy named Snow and another guy named Flake. Back in the 1870s."

"Dude . . . shut up."

Jonah smiled. "My last name is Flake."

"Seriously?"

"There's a bunch of us in Snowflake. People tend to stay put."

Suddenly, the name rang a bell for Jake. "There's a movie about that town. I saw it on TV back in Tulsa. Some logger who said he got abducted —"

"—by a UFO. Yeah, that was Snowflake."

"That was some scary shit. They probed him with these creepy metal doohickies. Were you living there when that happened?"

Jonah shook his head. "I remember the movie. The abduction was before I was born. My cousin was town marshal back then. He thought the whole thing was a hoax."

"Marshal Flake."

Jonah hesitated, seeing the smirk on Jake's face. "Actually, yeah . . . Marshall Sanford Flake." He managed a sheepish smile. "Told you I was a country boy."

Jake was instantly remorseful. "No, man, it's cool. I grew up in the suburbs of Tulsa. I would have given anything to live somewhere that interesting."

“When did you move here?”

“About four years ago. Just picked up and left. Got tired of working at Wal-Mart.”

“So what do you do now?”

“I’m a gardener. Actually, a partner in a gardening firm.” It was stupid, but he couldn’t help bragging a little. For some reason, he wanted to impress this green kid from the hinterlands.

“And it doesn’t . . . you know . . . get to you?”

“What? Gardening? I love it.”

“No . . . this city . . . the people and all.”

Jake was pretty sure he knew what Jonah meant, but played dumb. “How so?”

“You know . . . San Francisco values . . . that sort of thing.”

Jake shook his head, remaining as poker-faced as possible. “Nope. No problem so far.”

The kid nodded rhythmically, as if keeping time with the silence between them.

The waiter returned with their meals—salmon for Jake, a rack of lamb for Jonah. Jake welcomed this temporary relief from conversation, since there was already a whiff of uneasiness in the air. He was making appreciative noises about the salmon, when he realized that Jonah’s head was bowed discreetly in prayer.

“Oh . . . sorry . . . I didn’t . . .”

“You wanna join me?”

“That’s okay. I’ll just . . . you go ahead.”

So Jonah kept his head bowed while his lips moved in silence for a few more awkward moments.

“Sorry,” said Jake, as soon as Jonah had picked up his knife and fork.

“No biggie. You were thanking Him in your own way.”

“I always thank the salmon.” Jake was joking, but not completely, since he often made an effort to be appreciative when a helpless creature had died for his sins.

Jonah chewed a mouthful of lamb before speaking again. “You’re not a Christian, then?”

Jake shrugged. “I was raised one.”

“But?”

“I dunno. I couldn’t buy it anymore.”

Jonah looked him directly in the eye. “You know, dude . . . that’s why they call it faith.”

“Believing what you know ain’t so.”

A cloud passed over the kid’s face.

“Mark Twain,” said Jake. “ ‘Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.’ ”

“Oh.”

The kid was looking more and more like the bug-eyed fish pressed against the porthole, so Jake kept his tone as gentle as possible. “I just don’t think that anybody’s up there. I don’t believe in life after death. I wish I could, but I can’t. I think if there’s a heaven, it has to be here and now. We’re the only ones who can make it happen.”

“I understand,” Jonah said softly. “That’s why I do what I do.”

Jake just blinked at him.

“I’m a missionary, Jake.”

“No kidding.” For a moment, Jake thought of the classic image, picturing the kid in a pith helmet and jungle khakis. “To where?”

“To here . . . for now.”

“Here? San Francisco?” It took him a while, but Jake finally saw the cold, gray light of dawn. “Oh . . . you’re a Mormon.”

“We actually prefer—”

“Right . . . sorry . . . the Latter Day . . . whatever. You came here for the election, then? To work for Prop 8?”

The kid nodded.

“Canvassing or something? Going door to door?”

“Yes.”

Jake could feel his face flashing red—a sure sign that he was beginning to lose control—but he made no effort to temper his reaction. “How did that work out for you? After you’d won, I mean . . . after you’d taken away people’s rights in a state you don’t even live in, for fuck’s sake. Did you feel you’d done some good in the world?”

Jonah seemed to think about that for a moment. “Truthfully . . . no.”

“Wow. Imagine that.”

“I’m not sorry it passed, because I truly do believe that marriage is between one man and one woman. But I never felt that I’d connected with another soul. Made a real difference, you know. I never had that one-on-one. And when I saw you standing there watching the sea lions, and you seemed so kind-hearted and decent and . . . I don’t know, like a regular guy . . . I felt like I had to reach out to you, because I could help.”

“And how would that be?”

“Look, Jake . . . I thought I might be gay myself until I met Becky.”

“Excuse me?”

“Maybe I’m totally out of line here, but I’m pretty good at telling when somebody’s—”

“You’re talking labels, Jonah. Around here we don’t put labels on people.” This was completely untrue, Jake realized—San Francisco was obsessed with labels—but he had to say something, and this was all he could manage in the heat of the moment.

“Let’s put it this way,” said Jonah, lowering his voice as he looked around the room. “You sleep with guys, right?”

After a moment, Jake replied quietly: “Yeah. Not often enough, but . . . yeah.”

“And do you know why that is?”

Jonah’s wooden, seminar-style questioning annoyed the hell out of Jake. “Because I’m attracted to them?”

“Yes,” said Jonah, missing the sarcasm completely, “but *why* are you attracted to them? I’ll tell you why. *Because you’re trying to complete your masculinity.* Someone, at some point in your life, said you weren’t man enough, and you believed them, and that’s why you think that being with another man will somehow—”

“Jonah—”

“Hear me out, dude. You’re one of the manliest guys I’ve ever met. Not just in appearance but . . . your manly heart and your compassion. You’re the real thing, dude. You’re man enough for any woman.”

By this point, Jake had lost track of his emotions. He felt flattered, insulted, humiliated and validated all at once. Without making a spectacle out of it (since several of the other diners were already glancing in their direction), he pulled his wallet from his back pocket and removed three twenties, tucking them under the butter dish.

“What’s that for?” asked Jonah.

“I gotta go. That should cover my portion.”

“C’mon, dude—”

“You mean well, Jonah . . . but you don’t have a clue what you’re dealing with.”

“If this is about Prop 8—”

“It’s about everything, Jonah. It’s about all sorts of shit you don’t know about in Snowflake. The world isn’t as neat as you think. It’s not your fault. It’s everybody else’s fault.” Jake pushed back his chair and stood up. “That includes me, for what it’s worth.”

Jonah gazed up at him in forlorn confusion.

Without looking back, Jake headed directly for the stairs, only to remember, as he climbed into the cool night air, that there was no instant escape from this phony island. He stood beneath the phony lighthouse and the real palm tree and waited for the shuttle to arrive, fretting at first that Jonah might follow him out there, then fretting because he did not. He imagined the kid sitting alone in the midst of all those strangers, heartsick that he had failed in his holy mission. He considered going back, but he knew there was nothing he could say that wouldn’t make it worse. He was well beyond saving by anyone.

An hour later, back at the flat, Jake was in bed when Anna appeared in the doorway in her Chinese pajamas. She had been fast asleep when he got home, so he couldn’t imagine how she could have heard him crying from the other end of the hall.

“Is there something I can do, dear?”

“No. I’m fine. Go back to bed.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice at listening.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

She turned to leave, then stopped abruptly, wobbling a little as she did so. “Maybe this Sunday we can go to the new science museum in the park.”

“Sure. That would be nice.”

“I hear they have green things growing on the roof.”

“I’ve heard that, too.”

“Good night, dear. You’re a man among men.”

It was pretty much the same thing Jonah had said, but this time the compliment actually meant something.

The Elusive Leia

Shawna's homeless woman had begun to haunt her. That's how she thought of her now—as *her* homeless woman—since the poor creature had a way of materializing at the oddest times, though never in the actual flesh. Shawna would flash on her scalded face in the midst of an Almodovar film at the Sundance Kabuki, or down at the Rainbow Grocery when she was scooping rice from the bulk-foods bin. Once, she even dreamed about the woman, dreamed that the two of them were dining at the Cliff House, gossiping like old friends as they admired the sunset, though—as dreams had a way of doing—it wasn't the sleek new Cliff House but the funky old one with the greasy photographs and flocked wallpaper that Shawna remembered from her childhood.

What bothered her most was that she didn't know the woman's name. Her image was becoming clearer all the time in Shawna's promiscuous imagination, but she still lacked identification, that all-important peg on which to hang her humanity. How could you even survive, Shawna wondered, when no one bothered to learn your name?

She drove back to the underpass one foggy afternoon in the hope of a reunion, but the only person there was an old hippie with a sign reading GULF WAR VET. While waiting at the light, Shawna lowered her window and signaled him with a \$10 bill.

"Excuse me," she yelled.

The guy put down his sign and came hobbling toward her. As he took the bill, he examined it at length. "Money looks fake these days, don't it?"

She smiled but passed on the discussion, conscious of how little time she had. "I was wondering if you know a woman who sometimes signs on this corner. Red tracksuit. Forty or fifty years old, maybe."

The guy nodded so slowly she couldn't tell if it was a response or a tic.

"You do know her, then?"

"She ain't here."

"I see that. Do you know where she might be?"

"You could try the traffic island on South Van Ness."

"Do you know her name?"

The guy shrugged. "We call her Leia."

"What do you mean, you *call* her that?"

"Like Princess Leia."

"But . . . why?"

"I dunno. It's a nickname. Ask her."

The light turned green, signaling an end to their conversation. "Thanks a lot," she said, extending her hand. "My name's Shawna, by the way."

The guy just looked at her hand for a moment, as if it might somehow contaminate him. "Good for you," he muttered, before shuffling back to pick up his sign.

Shawna looked for the woman at the traffic island on South Van Ness, but she was nowhere to be found. There were several other signers working the island, but Shawna balked at the thought of interrogating another stranger about the elusive Leia.

That night, when she and Otto were eating at Weird Fish in the Mission, she told him about her abortive search, knowing already that he would question her motives.

"Is this about your writing?" he asked.

"No. I mean, it *could* be eventually, but it's not about that now."

"Then what?"

"I dunno. I just feel like . . . I'm *supposed* to find her. I know how fucked-up that sounds, but . . . she's in my consciousness now."

"What was it? Her sparkling personality?"

She shot him a peevish look.

"Hey, I'm just trying to nail this down. You should've told me earlier."

"Why?"

"Because I saw her this afternoon. Down at the Civic Center."

"You're kidding? What was she doing?"

He shrugged. "Trying a case at the courthouse."

“What?”

He smiled like a naughty little boy, then popped a French fry into his mouth. “You gotta learn to tell when I’m teasing.”

“No. You gotta learn to not be full of shit. Where was she? What was she doing?”

“She was sleeping in a cardboard box.”

“Seriously?”

“Well . . . as seriously as you can sleep in a cardboard box.”

Now she was really exasperated. “Why are you making light of this?”

“Because, ladylove . . .”

“Don’t call me that. Not while you’re being an asshole.”

“Shawna . . . listen.” Otto’s tone remained calm, maddeningly enough. “I think you’re getting a little ooga-booga about this. I see these people every day, and most of them are seriously loony and dangerous. It’s not as quaint and Dickensian as you think.”

“Did I say that? Did I say it was quaint and Dickensian?”

“Okay. Fine. Sorry.” He held his hands up in placid surrender. “Want me to show you where she is?”

She was surprised by the offer, until she realized the reason for it. “You don’t want me going down there on my own.”

“That’s right. I don’t.”

“Okay.” She gave him a half-smile to show that he was back in her good graces. “I can live with that.”

“When do you wanna go?”

“When do you think?” she replied.

They found parking on Grove Street, not far from City Hall, then cut across the plaza toward the library, passing the organic garden that Mayor Newsom had installed to demonstrate his support for sustainable agriculture. The rustic split-rail fence around the garden stood in ludicrous contrast to the grim-faced granite buildings in every direction. In the daytime, the plaza struck Shawna as a black-and-white movie; at night, even the shadows seemed to have shadows.

“What were you doing here, anyway?” she asked Otto.

“There was a matinee up at the Opera House. Sammy and I were working the crowd outside. We came down to Burger King afterwards.”

It unsettled her when he spoke of the monkey as if they were a couple, but she never let herself say that. Sammy, after all, was why she had fallen for Otto.

“By the way,” she said, “they call her Leia. As in Princess Leia.”

Otto looked puzzled for a moment. “Oh . . . the woman, you mean?”

“Yeah. It’s her nickname on the street.”

“Did she use to wear her hair like that or something?”

“Who knows?”

“Well, it’s appropriate.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Otto melodramatically, “I am about to take you to a galaxy far, far away.”

They followed Grove past the library into the heart of the Tenderloin, entering an extended hellscape of junkies and whores. This was always a shock to Shawna. You would never guess that some of these streets stretched all the way across town to Russian Hill with its cable cars and postcard views of the bay. To make the two-mile journey from there to here was to witness firsthand the gradual degradation of a city’s soul.

Instinctively, Shawna moved closer to Otto. “I thought you said she was in the Civic Center?”

“Well . . . two or three blocks away.” He turned and looked at her earnestly. “Do you wanna call it off?”

“No. Do you?”

Otto just smiled dimly and kept walking. Ahead of them, on the corner, was a vacant lot with a low wall of concrete blocks on two sides, presumably to keep people from parking there. To Shawna it looked like a deserted construction site, or maybe the rubble-strewn remains of a demolition. A billboard on a neighboring building depicted the eyes of an elegant dark-skinned woman gazing over the rim of a whiskey glass, with a tagline that read THE NIGHT KNOWS WHAT IT WANTS. The cold white light from the billboard made it easier to spot Leia’s box, but, mercifully, stopped just short of it.

The box wasn’t huge—refrigerator-size, Shawna guessed. There was certainly room enough for someone to lie down in there, though who that someone might be was currently obscured by a layer of black garbage bags.

Shawna stopped about ten feet from the box, wary of frightening the resident, and shot a quick glance at Otto.

“What should I do?” she whispered.

He shrugged. “Say hello, I guess. You’re asking *me*?”

Otto was obviously pouting, but she didn’t have time to humor him. She had already noticed several scary-looking knots of men on the other corners. The Orpheum Theatre was just down the street, reassuringly armored in neon, but this was one of those neighborhoods where you knew to stride briskly, eyes fixed straight ahead, if you had somehow made the mistake of passing through. And here they were, stopping.

“Excuse me,” she called. “Leia?”

There was no response. The garbage bag didn’t stir.

“I met you down by the freeway last week. I gave you some money.”

“There’s nobody there,” said Otto.

“You don’t know.”

“If she’s sleeping, then I wouldn’t disturb her.”

Shawna moved closer. “Leia?”

“Don’t, Shawna.”

She was reaching for the garbage bag when it flew back of its own accord, fanning a rotten-sweet stench into her nostrils. The person whose home she’d just invaded sprang up like a crazed jack-in-the-box, making Shawna yelp. It wasn’t Leia, though; it was a pockmarked Hispanic guy in a stocking cap.

“Shit. I’m so sorry. I was looking for Leia.”

He propped himself up on one elbow. “What you want with her?”

“Just to help.”

“She’s down the alley. I’m saving her place.”

Shawna shuddered to think that this wilted cardboard coffin required “saving” for anyone, but she knew the guy was telling the truth. She had just spotted Leia’s YOUR MAMA WOULD GIVE A DAMN sign in the weeds behind the box.

“Which alley?” asked Otto, stepping forward.

The man pointed across the street. “Over there next to the blue beer sign. But don’t go down there.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t.” The man lay down again, pulling the plastic bag over himself.

Shawna turned to Otto. “We have to.”

“No, we don’t.”

“Well, I am.” She strode across the lot, stepped over the concrete-block wall, then turned back to Otto. She realized she’d put this peace-loving guy in a terrible spot, and, most of all, she didn’t want it to look like she was testing his loyalty. “It’s all right,” she said. “I’ll be careful. I just wanna look.”

She crossed the street and walked half a block to the mouth of the alley. She could hear Otto’s footsteps behind her—or what she assumed were his footsteps—but she didn’t look back for fear of engaging him again. This was *her* craziness, not his.

The alley was barely ten feet wide and lit only by a window in the neighboring residence hotel. Even from out on the sidewalk it stank of piss. Someone halfway down the alley was sitting on the ground under a blanket, rocking rhythmically back and forth. In the far distance another figure, this one only in silhouette, was pressed against a wall with odd formality, like someone about to be executed. His stillness was mesmerizing; it took Shawna a while to notice that someone was kneeling in front of him.

“She’s got a trick,” whispered Otto, slipping his arm around her waist.

“Jesus!” She jumped more than she would have liked.

“That’s good. Your reflexes still work. C’mon.”

“Wait.”

“I mean it, Shawna. No more of this. I’m manning up here.”

She turned to him with a crooked smile. “Really?”

“If you wanna get killed over a blow job in an alley—”

“Shhhh.” She took his arm to silence him. “We’re leaving, okay? We can wait for her back at the box.”

“We’re not waiting anywhere. We’re heading straight back to—”

The end of that thought was amputated by a scream from the alley.

“Fuck,” murmured Shawna, swiveling to look down the murky passageway. The silhouetted figures at the end had now become a single writhing mass. The person under the blanket was yelling “shut up” repeatedly, like a mantra, still rocking back and forth.

Then came another scream, even more horrible than the first, prompting Otto to sprint down the alley toward the sound. “Wait,” yelled Shawna. “Be careful.”

I dragged the poor guy here, and now he’s going to be killed.

She headed into the alley, though more cautiously than Otto had. “We’re calling the police!” she yelled. “Leave her alone!” She hoped this wouldn’t further inflame the situation, but it was all she could think to do. Then she heard the abrasive clatter of an overturning garbage can and watched as a man bolted into the street at the other end of the alley. To her abject horror, her boyfriend was running after him. “Otto, don’t!”

For one eerie moment Leia was nowhere to be found. Then Shawna rolled away the garbage can and saw the figure lying in the shadows. She knelt next to it and listened for signs of life, taking the woman’s hand in hers.

“Leia?”

A guttural groan.

“Are you all right?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Never mind. Just a friend. Can you sit up?” She slid her hand under Leia’s back only to hit something syrupy and warm and yank it away again.

“Owww,” screamed Leia.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” The carrion stench of the woman was going straight to the pit of Shawna’s stomach. “Just lie still, sweetheart. We’re gonna take care of you.”

Shawna dug her phone out of her coat and dialed 911.

“I have a woman here,” she told the operator. “She’s been stabbed, I think.”

“You *think*?” growled Leia.

“And what’s the location?”

“Oh . . . shit . . . I don’t know. It’s an alley in the Tenderloin. It’s off of Hyde Street. Please hurry.”

“I’ll need a name, ma’am. Is there someone there who can—?”

“Cocksuck,” said Leia.

“Hang on, Leia . . . Operator, maybe I could meet them out at—”

“Cocksuck Alley!”

Shawna looked down at Leia. “Seriously? That’s the name?”

The woman grunted in the affirmative. “The cops call it that, too.”

“Okay . . . great. Operator, apparently it’s known on the street as Cocksuck Alley.”

Silence.

“Please don’t hang up. This isn’t a prank, I swear.” Desperate, still holding Leia’s hand, Shawna looked toward the end of the alley where Otto had just reappeared, breathing heavily. “What does that sign say?” she yelled.

“What sign?”

“On the wall there. Where are we?”

Otto looked. “Cossack,” he hollered back.

“Like . . . Russian?”

“Yeah.”

Shawna clarified things for the operator, spelling the word for her. “We need an ambulance quick. She’s bleeding a lot.”

Otto joined them, stroking Shawna’s hair while she held Leia’s hand.

“Did he take my knife?” asked Leia.

Down the alley the guy under the polyester blanket continued intoning his evening prayer: “Shut up, shut up, shut up.”

Even the sirens, when they came, didn’t silence him.

A Nibble on the Line

“I have the perfect person,” said DeDe Halcyon-Wilson as she topped off Mary Ann’s wine glass like the gracious hostess she’d been raised to be. “Her office is just a couple of miles away. You could recuperate here, if you like.”

Here was Halcyon Hill, the mock-Tudor manor house in Hillsborough that had been DeDe’s home since childhood. She and D’orothea had recently re-chintzed the furniture and installed pretty green-silk Roman shades, but the house was still very much the way Mary Ann remembered it. Only DeDe herself had changed significantly; the prodigal debutante who’d returned from Guyana so sinewy and serious was now this pleasant little partridge of a woman. Her patrician, finely furred jawline evoked the previous mistress of this house, DeDe’s long-dead mother, Frannie Halcyon. And Mary Ann could well imagine what Frannie would have said about the fountain on the wall of the sunroom: a stylized vagina with water sluicing through petals of smooth pink marble.

“Too much?” asked DeDe, seeing where Mary Ann’s eyes had landed.

“No . . . it’s very subtle, actually. It’s like a Bufano.”

“That’s what it is.”

“You’re kidding?” Mary Ann had prided herself on spotting the sculptor’s distinctive work when she’d lived here—all those faceless penguins and slope-shouldered mama bears embracing their young. “I didn’t know he did . . . people.”

DeDe chuckled. “He didn’t. D’or bought it in a spiritual shop in Gualala. I told her it was a horrid idea, but she’d just taken a Lorazepam and could not be contained.”

“It’s not a Bufano, you mean?”

“God, no. I feel so insensitive, Mary Ann. I should have taken it down before you got here.”

“Why?” Mary Ann gave her a spunky smile. “I get to keep *that* part.”

Clearly relieved by this offhanded absolution, DeDe managed a laugh. “Leaving in the playpen, as they say.”

“What?” said Mary Ann.

“Our friend Barb had a hysterectomy last summer. She told us: ‘They may be taking out the baby carriage, but at least they’re leaving in the playpen.’”

Cute, thought Mary Ann, if not especially comforting, since these days her playpen saw about as much action as her baby carriage. “So your friend is okay?”

“She’s great. Just fine. I asked her to join us today, but she had a meeting of her sustainable-gardening group. You know, it’s the most fixable form of cancer there is.”

“So they tell me.”

“Are you scared?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Of what exactly?”

Mary Ann’s gaze drifted through the diamond-paned window into the green-and-gold blur of the garden. “That I’ll be different when it’s over . . . or dead. I alternate.”

DeDe, thank God, didn’t try to be a Pollyanna about it. “You’ll really like Ginny, I think. She’s a good egg.”

“The oncologist?”

“Mmm. She’s a serious advocate for women.”

“She’s gay, I take it.”

“Is that an issue for you?”

“Of course not. Please. I was just curious.”

“I can drive you there this afternoon, if you like. I’ve already told her we might stop by.”

Mary Ann felt a rush of unalloyed affection for her old friend. “Oh, DeDe, would you? That would be such a load off my mind.” It soothed her considerably to have someone she trusted take matters in hand like this. She felt so much less alone.

“Ginny says it’s a simple matter to have your records transferred. There are no hard feelings, are there? With your oncologist in Darien, I mean?”

Mary Ann shook her head. “Not yet. I haven’t said a word to him.”

“Guess you’d better, then.”

Mary Ann hesitated, imagining that awkward scenario as she took another sip of her Sauvignon Blanc.

“What’s the matter?” asked DeDe.

“It’s a little too close for comfort. He plays racquetball with Bob at our club.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Of course I didn’t find that out until I was in the stirrups and he asked how good ol’ Bob was doing in Europe.”

DeDe groaned. “No wonder you wanted a new doctor! Jesus, do you think he knew about . . . you know . . . Bob and your life coach?”

Mary Ann shrugged. “I wouldn’t put it past Bob to brag about it.”

DeDe absorbed that for a moment. “Let Ginny handle it, then. That’s just the sort of challenge she enjoys. Does Bob know yet, by the way?”

“About what?”

“That you caught him in the act . . . or where you are, for that matter.”

Mary Ann shook her head grimly. “I don’t have the energy for that.”

“I hear you,” said DeDe.

What they *both* could hear in the weighty silence that followed was the gurgle and purr of the vagina fountain.

“Listen to that infernal thing,” DeDe muttered. “I could just kill D’or. The pump got clogged one week last month, and it started spitting at people.”

“No.”

DeDe smirked like a wicked teenager. “It happened during D’or’s Buddhist study group.”

And they laughed, wearily, for a good little while.

The oncologist’s office was in a rambling shingled L tucked in a grove of gnarled oaks. It reminded Mary Ann of a small but elegant shopping complex in Darien where she had sometimes bought wine-and-cheese baskets as last-minute birthday presents. Dr. Ginny herself was equally

reassuring: fortyish and clear-eyed, authoritative without being bossy. “I want you to know,” she said, “I’ve done this over eleven hundred times.”

Mary Ann’s response was a soft-spoken “Wow,” as if this handsome woman had just announced an impressive golf score.

“I’m good at it, in other words. I consider it my calling.” The doctor’s honeyed earnestness was a perfect fit with her neutral-toned office and its Zen-spa furnishings.

“How long will it take?” Mary Ann asked.

“We’ll have you out in a day.”

Mary Ann heard herself exhale. “Great.”

“Have you had your appendix out yet?”

Mary Ann was thrown. “No . . . actually.”

“I can do that at the same time, if you like.”

Mary Ann was beginning to feel like a dusty attic from which useless items were being systemically discarded. “Do you think my appendix might be . . . cancerous?”

Dr. Ginny shook her head with an indulgent smile. “Here’s how it’ll play out, Mary Ann. Once I’m in there, I’ll lift out your uterus very gently”—she cupped her hands as if holding a small, helpless animal—“and then I’ll slip it into a plastic bag and hand it to the pathologist, who will proceed to slice it finely to determine the extent of the cancer. Which means that you and I will have some time on our hands. Well, *you’ll* be asleep, of course, but I might as well make myself useful . . . hence the appendix.”

“But it’s never given me any trouble,” Mary Ann offered feebly.

“Yes, but next year you’ll be scuba diving in Palau and it *will* give you trouble, and they’ll airlift you to Guam, where they have a 1984 MRI machine, and so one of my well-intended colleagues will give you a big ugly scar that I can avoid completely with laparoscopic surgery. I plan on leaving you with a nice smooth tummy.”

“Oh . . . okay, then . . . I guess.”

“No extra charge, of course.”

“Thanks.” It was the same tone Mary Ann would have used with a saleslady at Bergdorf Goodman who’d just offered to throw in free alterations. It occurred to her that this was Dr. Ginny’s gift: the ability to make something casual out of the cataclysmic.

“So here’s the deal. From now on, I’ll do all the fretting, because I intend to do this as perfectly as possible. I’m funny that way.”

Under other circumstances, such cavalier boasting might have annoyed the hell out of Mary Ann, but certainly not here, not now; she craved the steel-reinforced tenderness that Dr. Ginny was offering, and that made her a believer on the spot.

“I’ll warn you,” the doctor continued, “you may feel a little depressed afterwards, but that’s just part of the healing process.”

Mary Ann figured that couldn’t possibly be worse than the suffocating gloom she was feeling now.

“Are you staying with DeDe and D’or?” asked the doctor.

“No. Friends in the city.”

“Would you like a hospital there?”

“If possible.”

“Of course.” Another smile. “We’re in this together, Mary Ann.”

That night, while Michael and Ben were visiting friends on Potrero Hill, Mary Ann brewed a pot of peppermint tea and took it out to her cottage in the garden. There was finally a nip in the air, a pungent dampness that suggested the onset of winter. She found herself grateful for the jokey gift the guys had bought her several days earlier: a ridiculous blanket with sleeves they had all seen on television and laughed about.

Sitting in her only chair with her laptop on her lap, the lights of the hillside winking through her window, she logged onto Facebook and posted her status report:

Mary Ann Singleton is drinking peppermint tea in her Snuggie, wondering if life is going to get better.

Then she waited, like a fisherman, for a nibble on the line.

As usual, she’d been careful not to betray her location. She didn’t want Bob—or any of her friends in Darien—to start making inquiries. She was savoring the sensation of floating free in cyberspace, tethered only to a growing number of capital-F Friends who, with half a dozen exceptions, were not her friends at all. In the beginning most of these people had some connection to Michael or Ben, but now she was engulfed in an ever-

widening vortex of friend requests, and she was recklessly accepting them all.

Most of them, as Ben had predicted, recognized her name from the old days in San Francisco:

*i watched yr show when I stayed home sick from school, freeze-dried
pets, lol*

My dad thought you were way hot

I am soooooo honored to be your friend

*I love that dress you wore when the Queen of England ate at Trader
Vic's*

Are you really THAT Mary Ann Singleton?

Using her maiden name had not only severed her from all things Bob but also unearthed people who actually predated her celebrity in San Francisco. There were three high school classmates, all looking *ancient* and only one of whom she remembered, because of her weird-looking close-set eyes. There was a lumpy old Irish guy who had worked on “the floor”—as he had called it—when she was still a secretary at Lassiter Fertilizer in Cleveland. This wasn’t so much her youth as a previous incarnation.

From her San Francisco days she had found people who’d been featured on her show: a white witch she had interviewed one Halloween, a beefy Samoan guy who had made scrap-wood sculptures on the Emeryville flats. She had never really *known* these people; their value at the moment lay in the fact that they had passed through her life without lingering. This enabled her to create a manageable version of the past, an epic drama with a cast composed entirely of walk-ons. These near-strangers with whom she bantered so breezily could hold a mirror to her life without ever reflecting the pain.

A week earlier she’d imagined scaling down her life to the size of this cottage, but, in reality, she’d shrunk it smaller still. Tonight, as DeDe had driven her home from Hillsborough, uttering sweet reassurances, Mary Ann’s mind had already been racing ahead to the cozy hearth-glow of her laptop. She assured herself that this was *not* addictive behavior, since there was really nothing else for her to do right now. Social networking was just a

salve for her troubles, a harmless diversion to fill the hours until she went under the knife—or the laparoscope—and knew where she was heading.

While waiting for a response to her post, she accepted three more friend requests and blocked an application for something called “Farmville”—another imbecilic game, no doubt. She’d already rejected a glut of offers to participate in “Mafia Wars” or to suck on someone’s “Lollipop,” whatever *that* meant. She preferred the kind of Friends who just talked about the weather, or showed off their vacation snaps of Fiji, or wondered aloud whether to eat that bar of 70% dark chocolate *right now*. There was a terse sewing-circle flavor to this discourse, a genial brevity, that she found appealing.

The first person to react to her post was someone called Fogbound One. There was no photo on the profile, just the little silhouette of a cowlicked head that Facebook provided as a placeholder. “Happiness is a choice,” wrote Fogbound One, displaying his/her usual weakness for bumper-sticker wisdom. Mary Ann had hidden this person from her News Feed as soon as she’d learned it was possible, but he/she was technically Mary Ann’s Friend, so, when the chat box pinged onto her screen, she felt obliged to respond.

Still feeling blue?

Little better, thanks.

What color is your Snuggie?

Red.

Mine’s blue.

Lol. Silly aren’t they?

Their warm.

Yeah they are.

I loved your show.

Thanks so much.

Didn’t you use to live on Barbary Lane?

Yes.

I was not far from there.

Somewhere in the fog, I take it.

ROFLMAO

Sorry. What’s that? New to this.

Rolling on the floor laughing my ass off.

Ah.

Your quick.

Thank you.

Do you still live on Russian Hill?

No. I miss it.

Me too. I used to be friends with somebody who lived in your building.

Who?

Norman Neal Williams. Remember him?

Sorry. Doesn't ring a bell.

I thought you dated him.

No. Sorry. Long time ago. Nice talking to you.

She clicked the little x to make this awful thing go away. She'd wanted to stay for another comment or two, just to look natural about it, but she could already feel the coppery sting of vomit in the back of her throat. Shoving the laptop aside, she flung off the Snuggie and lunged for the bathroom, but made it only as far as the shower stall.

Dwelling on Things

“Watch it!” yelled Michael, “that guy is totally shitfaced!”

Ben winced, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. “I see him.”

“Didn’t look like it.”

“Michael—”

“Okay. Fine. He was staggering into the street, that’s all. You could barely see him in the dark.”

“I saw him.”

“I was trying to be helpful.”

“It doesn’t help when you do that. Believe me.”

Michael maintained a moody silence as they passed Dolores Park on their way down 18th Street to the Mission. When he spoke again, his hand was on Ben’s thigh.

“Is it backseat driving when you’re both in the front seat?”

Ben smiled but said nothing. In the five years they’d been a couple, he’d always been the one to drive when they traveled together. They both preferred it that way, since Michael was a dangerously nervous driver, though that hadn’t stopped him from being “helpful” to the point of obnoxiousness. Ben let it go most of the time, since he knew it had far less to do with control issues than with Michael’s morbid preoccupations.

Tonight they were on their way to see their friends Mark and Ray at their flat on Fair Oaks Street. Mark was sixty; Ray was eighty-two. The difference in their ages was almost the same as Ben and Michael’s, making the older couple both an intergenerational role model and, for better or worse, a possible bellwether of things to come.

Ray had Alzheimer’s these days (“a fairly mild form,” as Mark had gamely put it), which rendered him foggy but jolly, a nicer person by far

than his former ornery self. It was Mark, poor guy, who'd been shafted in the bargain. The lupine young man in drawstring pants, whom Ray had fallen for one balmy night at Short Mountain, had been forced, after thirty years of contented man-on-man love, to open their relationship to another person.

This made for some interesting dinner parties.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Ray crooned from the top of the stairs, as soon as he had buzzed them in. "Did you find a place to park?"

"No problem," yelled Ben, peering up that alpine slope at the lower half of Ray's skinny legs. It amazed Ben that the old man could still negotiate this climb, though it was saddening to have such demonstrable proof that Ray's body had outlasted his mind. He was wearing sneakers tonight, Ben noticed—fluorescent green ones, polka-dotted with peace signs—which an outsider might have taken as another sign of dementia. Ben saw them as an echo of Ray's Radical Faerie days, and therefore found them reassuring.

"Cool shoes," he said.

"Who? Me?"

"Who else?" He kissed Ray's parchment cheek, joining him on the landing. "Don't let my husband see them. He'll want some."

Ray seized Ben's hand and held on to it. "Where is he?"

"Down here with the Sherpas." Michael was halfway down the stairs, exaggerating his breathlessness as he held tight to the iron banister. It was the game he always played, a pose to make Ray feel younger and stronger. Ben loved him for it.

"C'mon," said Ray, beckoning Michael with a skinny arm. "There's hot buttered rum at the summit."

They followed Ray into what Ben always thought of as the great room, a long, warmly lit space on which this couple had left their vaguely hippified mark since the early eighties. There was nothing special about the flat, decoratively speaking—Bohemia by way of Pottery Barn—but Ben loved the sheer *archaeology* of the place, the history buried under magnets on the refrigerator door. These guys had lived a life here, and it showed.

Ray hollered into the kitchen for Mark, who appeared seconds later carrying a tray of mismatched ceramic mugs. "What is it, you cuntface?"

The old man hooted with laughter. Ben shot a glance at Michael and saw that he had been every bit as jolted by the greeting as Ben himself.

“It’s from *The Sound of Music*,” Mark explained, holding the tray out to his guests. “You know the scene where—”

“I was going to do that,” Ray said, interrupting.

“Do what?”

“Bring out the rum.”

“That’s sweet, my darling, but it’s hot. Not to mention buttered.” Mark shot a knowing look at Ben and Michael. Ben could remember a time, only a few years earlier, when Ray could be entrusted with a tray of cocktails without danger of losing a drop.

No longer, apparently.

Michael took one of the mugs. “I don’t get it. What’s from *The Sound of Music*?”

Ray grinned impishly. “The Mother Superior says it to . . . whatshername . . . the star.”

“Julie Andrews,” Michael offered.

“ ‘What is it, you cuntface?’ ” This time it was Ray who said it, giggling. Ben was still lost. “Is this in a drag version or something?”

“It’s in the movie,” said Mark. “Julie doesn’t want to be a nun anymore and tells the Mother Superior she just can’t face it anymore, so the Mother Superior says, ‘What is it you cahnt face?’ You know . . . with a broad European *a*. Hence . . .”

“ ‘What is it, you cuntface?’ ” Ray crowed the line one more time before pressing his fingers to his mouth. “Hope Arlene didn’t hear. She hates that kinda talk.”

Ben’s eyes darted nervously toward Michael, who, in turn, glanced at Mark, who connected with them both in a cat’s cradle of wordless mortification.

“Shall we get comfortable?” said Mark.

“Arlene should be down soon,” said Ray. “She’s putting her face on.”

Mark sighed and took Michael’s arm, leading the way to the sofa.

Ben sidled up next to Ray, placing his hand on the small of Ray’s back as he did his level best to shift the focus. “I hear you guys went out to Cavallo Point last week.”

“Mmm.”

“What did you think of the new restaurant?”

“It used to be a military base, you know.”

“I did . . . yes. Did you like it?”

Ray eased himself into a big armchair upholstered in paisley wool. “I thought it was completely stark and charmless, to tell you the truth. And way too expensive.”

“I agree with you completely.”

“Arlene adored it, though. She’s always been partial to fancy places.”

Arlene had once been Ray’s wife. They had divorced several months before the life-changing Faerie Gathering where he met Mark. Arlene had stayed in Fort Wayne for a few more years before moving to South Dakota with a widower she’d met on a bus tour of the Holy Land. After that, by mutual consent, Ray and Arlene lost touch. Ray, in fact, hadn’t learned of Arlene’s death until eight months after her funeral, when a former neighbor from Fort Wayne was visiting San Francisco. Mark, who was almost forty by then and had never even met Arlene, had confessed, shamefully, to a certain relief. With Arlene gone, the slate would finally be clean; Ray would be his and his alone.

Or so he’d thought. Arlene had come back with a vengeance after Ray came down with Alzheimer’s. It wasn’t that his failing mind had resurrected the strained decade he’d spent with Arlene; it had simply imported her into his life. Anything Ray had shared with Mark inevitably became a fond, fuzzy memory of life with Arlene. She was gobbling up Mark’s marriage like a fungus—even recent events like Cavallo Point, where, if Ben recalled correctly, the two men had celebrated their thirtieth anniversary.

After dinner, while Michael and Ray were having coffee in the great room, Ben helped Mark with the dishes.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?”

Mark nodded grimly. “Last week he told the cleaning lady that him and Arlene had just gone to the nude beach in Sitges.”

“Ouch.”

“It wasn’t like he ever loved her. He didn’t even *like* her that much. He barely talked about her at all for thirty years.”

Ben towel-dried a plate and handed it to Mark. “Do you ever correct him?”

“They tell you not to. They say it just confuses them and makes them feel bad.” He put the plate on the shelf above the sink. “I really hate that dead bitch.”

Ben smiled faintly.

“At least he still remembers me,” said Mark. “I shouldn’t complain.”

“Go ahead. You’re entitled.”

“No . . . really . . . we still have the moment. That’s all anybody has. And he’s always a lot of fun.”

As if on cue, Ray bellowed from the great room: “Arlene! We need a fill-her-up out here. You still there, Arlene?”

Mark sighed and grabbed the carafe off the coffee maker.

“Hate her,” he muttered, as he leaned into the swinging door.

On the way home, neither of them said anything for a long time. Michael was the first to break the silence: “I would never mistake you for anybody else.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I mean it. I might be a cranky old fool some day, but I’ll never forget who you are. Or what we’ve done together.”

Ben took Michael’s hand and kissed the back of it. “We don’t come with that kind of warranty.”

“Well, *I* do. Just take me to Pinyon City or . . . make me something vegan . . . or flop your balls in my face. I’ll remember.”

Ben chuckled. “He spooked you?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Me, too. A little.”

“You know, they say that marijuana actually helps prevent Alzheimer’s.”

“Who said that? Woody Harrelson?”

Michael mugged at him.

“Speaking of Pinyon City,” said Ben, “why don’t we head up there in a few days? Are you locked into anything workwise?”

“Not that I can think of. Is there snow on the way or something?”

“Yep. You think Mary Ann would like to hang with you while I go boarding?”

“I dunno. She’s having the surgery next week.”

“Maybe she could use a change of scenery.”

“We could always ask,” said Michael.

There was still a light on in the cottage when they got home, so Michael went out to talk to Mary Ann. When he finally returned, well over half an hour later, Ben was already in bed with Roman, giving him his obligatory nightly belly rub.

“Watch out,” Ben warned. “He’s been farting.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Great.”

Ben gingerly shifted the dog to the end of the bed while Michael shed his clothes. “What did she say?”

“About what?”

“Pinyon City.”

Michael seemed distracted. “Oh . . . she’s up for it.”

“But?”

“Nothing. She wants to go.”

“So why did that take half an hour?”

Michael climbed into bed and snuggled into Ben’s side. “I had to hold her hand for a while. Somebody on Facebook mentioned somebody she used to date, and she was weirded out about it. It was no big deal.”

“What did they say?”

“Nothing, really. Just brought up his name.”

“Why would that weird her out?”

“She’s in a really dark place right now. Who can blame her? I think Pinyon City will do her a world of good. We can go to the hot springs, or maybe snowshoe across the meadow. Do we have a ski jacket she can wear?”

“Michael, who was this guy? What is it you’re not telling me?”

“She really hates talking about it, sweetie. I’m the only one she’s ever shared it with.”

“Fine. I won’t ask her about it. And I won’t tell her you told me.” He held up his hand, pointing to his wedding band. “Full disclosure.”

Michael took a while to compose his answer. “He was this creep . . . this pedophile who lived on the roof.”

“That she dated.” Ben gave him a heavy-lidded look.

“She didn’t know that when she dated him. He was just a shy guy who had a crush on her, and she felt sorry for him. They had dinner a few times,

that's all."

"How did she find out, then?"

"Find out what?"

"That he was a pedophile."

"Oh . . . she found kiddie porn in his room. Norman was in some of the pictures. He had one of those black bars over his eyes, but she could tell who it was. Plus, she recognized the little girl. They'd gone trick-or-treating together."

Ben frowned. "*Who'd* gone trick-or-treating?"

"Mary Ann and Norman and this kid."

"And she didn't wonder what he was doing with this child?"

"He was supposedly babysitting for some friends in the East Bay."

"Jesus. Did she call the police?"

"Of course. But he was gone by the time they showed up."

"Gone from where?"

"Barbary Lane. He didn't even leave his room key with Anna. He just left on Christmas Eve and never came back."

"So he must've known that they knew about him, right?"

"Oh, yeah . . . I'm sure."

For some reason, Michael didn't sound entirely convinced about this, but Ben decided not to badger him about it further. "So when did this happen?"

"Thirty-two years ago. The first year Mary Ann was in town. You were barely on the planet at that point."

Ben squeezed Michael's arm in rebuke. "That doesn't mean I'm not supposed to know about it."

"I know you think she's a drama queen," said Michael, "but she's had some actual drama."

"Apparently," said Ben.

To Save Some Guy

With the weekend came rain—or at least a drizzly mist—so Jake proposed they blow off the new science museum and stay home. Anna was chipper about it, insisting that all she needed on a day like this was to snuggle up in the new gazebo with a pot of Earl Grey tea and a box of ginger snaps. Jake would have much preferred the albino alligator and the living roof and the four-story rainforest, but he knew that Anna’s energy was lower than usual, so there was no point in braving the park in this shitty weather.

He dragged a space heater into the gazebo and rolled down the plastic curtains before settling Anna in her chair with her Hudson Bay blanket. He was glad to see that the gazebo wasn’t leaking, since he’d built it himself a few months earlier. Anna was making a methodical show of appreciation, surveying the space like an astronaut checking her capsule before a flight. “Perfect,” she said. “I couldn’t ask for more.”

Jake pulled up a chair next to her. “Warm enough?”

“Oh . . . dear . . . before I forget . . . a young man came by yesterday when you were at work.”

Jake felt tightening in his gut. “Oh, yeah?”

“His name was Snow, I believe.”

“Flake,” Jake muttered.

“What, dear?”

“His name was Jonah Flake, right?”

“Yes! That’s it.” She rapped her knuckles comically against the side of her head, so as to reprimand her brain for its silly mistake. “He thought he had the wrong place until I told him I was your roommate. I hope I didn’t frighten him.”

“Who cares?”

“What, dear?”

“He’s a Mormon. He’s trying to save me.”

“How interesting.”

“Correction: he’s trying to save some guy I haven’t even *become* yet.”

Anna studied him for a moment, blinking her bleary blue eyes. “He thinks you’re gay, you mean? A gay man?”

Jake grunted in the affirmative.

“Well . . . isn’t that sort of encouraging?”

“C’mon. If he wants to fix a gay man, what the hell’s he gonna think about a trans man? I haven’t got time for that kind of shit.”

“Was this the boy from the floating island?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Well, he seems to like you. He said to tell you he was sorry.”

Jake said nothing; there was nothing to say.

“He looked like he meant it. He looked bereft, in fact.”

He shouldn’t have snapped at her, but he did. “Anna, did you hear what I said? He’s trying to save me.”

Taking her time about it, Anna tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Or trying to be saved. Most of us are doing one or the other.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have no idea, and you won’t either unless you call him back.”

It was typical of Anna to toss out something mysterious like that, then run away before she was forced to explain herself.

Jake folded his arms with a sigh. “Would you like your cocoa now, Your Majesty?”

Anna ignored the question. “You know, dear, I know exactly how that feels.”

“How what feels?”

“To know who you are inside when other people don’t.”

Of course he knew that she knew that, but he didn’t feel like a pep talk right now, even from his tran mother. He didn’t feel like anything. He felt dead inside, a total nonbeing whose feelings didn’t matter one way or another.

“The thing is,” Anna went on, “you can’t stay open to love if you’re always afraid of being hurt.”

"I wasn't looking for love. He's not even gay. I thought we could be friends."

"Then how can you know if that's possible if you don't—"

"What? Come out to a Mormon? A guy who came here to stop gay marriage? He even calls himself a missionary!"

"Then you should be one, too."

"That's not me, Anna. I'm a private person."

Anna rearranged her long, pale fingers in her lap. "I used to think the same thing about myself. But I was only postponing the chance to be loved as myself."

"C'mon. He would freak out."

"Maybe."

"*Maybe?*"

"Probably, then. But this is about *you*, dear. You would be claiming who you are, whatever happens. There's something to be said for that. Believe me."

The rain was coming down harder now, clattering like a handful of gravel against the roof of the gazebo. Rather than argue with Anna, Jake made a dash for the kitchen, where he microwaved two mugs of tea and shook half a dozen ginger snaps into a wooden salad bowl. When he returned, he discovered that Notch had taken refuge in Anna's lap.

"Poor old girl," said Anna, stroking the little cat's raggedy black fur. "The rain caught her off guard."

"I wondered where she was," said Jake. He set the bowl down on Anna's flat-topped ceramic elephant, then handed her a mug of tea. She sipped it wordlessly, solemnly, gazing into the distance, letting the silence speak for itself.

"I get what you're saying," Jake said at last.

"But?"

He shrugged. "It'll be easier to do when I'm finished."

She nodded slowly. "The surgery."

"Yeah."

"You still want it, then?"

"Oh, yeah." The issue, of course, was not whether Jake wanted the surgery but whether he could ever afford it. The nest egg he'd brought with him from Tulsa had been spent on his double mastectomy, and he'd been

scrambling ever since just to keep his head above water financially. Michael paid him as well as he could, but—almost overnight, it seemed—the recession had turned gardeners into a disposable luxury.

“You know,” said Anna, “there have been people who regret having the change. Whatever direction they’re heading. I’m sure they told you that at your meetings.”

“Did *you* regret it?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not for a minute.”

“Okay, then.”

“I’m not you, dear.”

Jake shrugged. “Close enough.”

Anna smiled, taking Jake’s hand in hers and nestling it in her lap where he could feel the warmth of Notch’s percolating body. “I had a daughter once,” she told him. “It agreed with me tremendously. I think I could use a son.”

Jake retracted his hand. “You might have to wait a little.”

She shook her head. “No time for that, dear.”

“Maybe not but—”

“I’m paying for it, Jake, and that’s that. I don’t want an argument. I’ve spoken to Selina and Marguerite and they’re making all the arrangements.”

Jake’s face reddened with embarrassment. “It’s a lot more expensive than you think. I don’t even have health insurance.”

“Hush,” she said. “I’m about to shuffle off this mortal coil. The money might as well do somebody some good.”

Jake didn’t get the “mortal coil” part, but he caught her drift just the same.

Like a Dog Before an Earthquake

Necrotizing fasciitis.

Shawna had heard the paramedics use that term the night the ambulance rushed Leia to San Francisco General. A day later, on Shawna's second visit to the hospital, she heard it again as she passed the nurses' station. It stalked her all the way down the hall to Leia's ward, droning in her head like some creepy, demonic incantation.

Necrotizing fasciitis, necrotizing fasciitis, necrotizing fasciitis . . .

The common term for it was "the flesh-eating disease." It was extremely rare in the general population, but not so much among street people who used heroin. Leia had an advanced case. The doctors in the emergency room had been far less concerned with the surface knife wound on her back than with the gruesome stew of rotting flesh on her left leg. The knife attack had actually been something of a blessing, in fact, since it brought immediate medical attention. Without it, they said, she'd already be dead.

Shawna strode into the ward, her eyes fixed straight ahead so as not to invade the tenuous privacy of the other patients. The salmon-and-green curtains on Leia's cubicle were closed, so Shawna paused and read the sign that identified the occupant:

LEMKE, Leia

The last name was news to Shawna, since Leia had been too fucked up and frightened to reveal anything on the night of her admission to the hospital.

Shawna cleared her throat. "Leia?"

A growl from behind the curtain.

"It's Shawna. May I visit?"

Another growl, apparently signifying yes.

Shawna pulled open the curtain and closed it behind her. Leia was sitting up in bed with an IV line sprouting grotesquely from a hole beneath her collarbone. As a nurse had explained on Shawna's previous visit, there was no other spot on the patient's over-perforated body that could accept the antibiotic. A tented sheet over Leia's legs spared visitors—and presumably the patient herself—the sight of a body eating itself alive.

Shawna pulled up a chair. "They're treating you okay?"

Leia grunted. "Methadone sucks."

That may be, thought Shawna, but you're not screaming anymore. You're not clawing at your skin. You seem almost human now.

"You cut your hair," Leia remarked. "It looks better."

Shawna was touched by the observation, coming as it had from someone who'd long ago abandoned control over her own appearance. "I wanted something simpler," she said, reflexively touching the tips of her new pixie cut. She had banished the Bettie Page look an hour earlier; she knew for sure now that it didn't suit this new chapter in her life.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Leia.

"Doing what?"

"This. Hangin' out with me."

Shawna tried to answer truthfully. "I don't know exactly."

"You with an agency or something? Rehab?"

"No. Nothing like that. I just saw you under the freeway and . . . I really enjoyed what little I saw of you, so . . . I decided to come looking for you."

"Lookin' for me? You came there on purpose?"

Shawna nodded. "You think I normally go strolling down Cocksuck Alley at that time of night?"

A quick flash of ruined teeth as Leia laughed.

"Give me a little credit, lady."

Leia regarded her soberly for a moment. "They wanna cut off my leg."

Shawna nodded. "I know."

"I can't do that."

"I hear you. I'd feel that way too."

"Well . . . tell 'em I won't, then."

“No, Leia. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because . . . the infection will spread if they don’t amputate.”

“Fuck it, then.”

“It’ll kill you. It is killing you. You can start to get better once the leg is gone. That’s what these antibiotics are for . . . to get you stronger before they . . . do it.”

“Please don’t . . . please.” Leia was sobbing now.

Shawna took her hand. “Would you like me to stay?”

“Stay?”

“Yeah. Be with you when you go in, and be there when you wake up.”

“FUCK THAT SHIT. THEY’RE NOT CUTTIN’ OFF MY LEG.”

“Okay,” Shawna replied feebly. “Whatever.”

“Get the fuck out of here, you pesky cunt. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Shawna backed toward the door, then fled without another word.

She called Otto as she left the hospital. Hearing the alarm in her voice, he offered to meet her for lunch at the Café Gratitude on Harrison Street. Otto was no more a vegan than she was, but the restaurant was an easy walk from the hospital, and they both liked the cheery neo-Aquarian vibe of the place. On previous visits, she had cut them slack about the pretentious-sounding menu items, but she was in no mood for that today.

“I’ll have the large café salad,” she told the pony-tailed girl server.

“You mean ‘I Am Fulfilled’?”

“Okay.”

“You want that, then?”

“Yeah. Are you gonna make me say it?”

The server gave her a curdled smile and turned to Otto. “How about you?”

“ ‘I Am Elated,’ please.”

“Would you like that with sour cream?”

“Yeah. ‘I Am Elated’ with sour cream.”

“Excellent.”

“And for dessert we’ll both have ‘I Am Awakening.’”

Seeing that Otto was enjoying himself, Shawna found herself smirking. When the server had left, she said: “ ‘I Am So Over This.’ ”

“C’mon. They have to say it. It’s part of the gig.”

Shawna heaved a sigh. “What am I gonna do, Otto?”

He didn’t have to ask what she meant. “You’ll go back, is my guess.”

“Then what?”

He shrugged. “You’ll be with her.”

“They say she’s dying. With or without the amputation.”

“Want me to go with you?”

“Would you? You don’t have to see her. I just need you there.”

“Should I bring Sammy?”

Her first instinct was to roll her eyes, but Otto had such a goofy, hopeful look on his face. “I don’t think that’s her kinda thing, honey.”

He cocked his big head of lion hair. “Really?”

“Yeah . . . really. Let’s don’t do that.”

Otto shrugged, looking a little hurt.

An hour later, while Otto lost himself in a curling paperback of *Infinite Jest*, Shawna spoke to the nurse on duty, a gaunt white guy with a blurry tat on his neck.

“We gave her something,” he said. “I think she’d like the company.”

“Promise?”

He smiled. “She’s feeling pretty good now.”

She headed straight for the cubicle, fearful of losing her nerve. Leia’s bed was tilted a little higher this time, but her eyes were closed.

“It’s me again,” said Shawna.

“Who’s me?”

“The pesky cunt.”

Leia’s eyes fluttered open. “What do you want?”

“Just to talk for a while. If you like.”

“Oh, shit. You’re a priest.”

Shawna shook her head, smiling. “Nowhere close. Just another fan of your sign.” This was incredibly lame, she realized, but it was the easiest way in.

“My *sign*? That horseshit about mamas?”

“Yeah. ‘Your mama would give a damn.’ I thought that was clever.”

“Because everybody loves their mama.”

This was neither a question nor a statement, just something vaguely, sorrowfully, in between. Shawna didn’t know where to go with it, and she was already feeling stupid and cowardly. “I was having dreams about you,” she confessed. “About the two of us.”

Leia scowled.

“Not like that. We were hanging out. Talking about ordinary things. Like old friends. People who’d known each other for years.”

Leia absorbed this for a moment, fiddling with her IV line as if it were a string of pearls languishing on her chest. “Did I look good?”

Shawna laughed. “Yeah. You did. We both did.”

A long silence while Leia’s eyes stayed glued on Shawna’s. “You’re one of those spooky people, huh?”

Shawna felt strangely sheepish. “I am. A little. Hope that’s okay.”

Leia shrugged. “Maurice was spooky. He felt shit all the time . . . shit that hadn’t happened yet. It would wake him up. Like a dog before an earthquake.”

“Maurice was—?”

“Just this guy on the island. He made that mama sign you love so much. I inherited it when he died. He had the same nasty shit I got.” She gazed down grimly at the tented atrocity, then, just as quickly, looked up again. “You always been that way?”

“What? Spooky?”

“Yeah.”

“Not always . . . but it started fairly early, yeah.”

“How’d you know you weren’t crazy?”

Shawna smiled at the memory. “I had a grown-up who recognized it in me. She was that way herself sometimes, so she taught me to go with it and not make a big deal of it.” She was picturing herself at ten or eleven in Mrs. Madrigal’s kitchen at 28 Barbary Lane. *You’ll be tempted to talk about it, dear, but don’t. Just let it be your secret friend.*

“I don’t really believe in it,” said Shawna. “I just notice it sometimes.”

“Maurice was just flat-out crazy.”

Shawna chuckled. “Maybe I am, too. Or maybe you and I just met somewhere. Once upon a time.”

“Ever shop at the Foot Locker in West Portal?”

“No.”

“The Fabric Barn in El Cerrito?”

Shawna shook her head. “You worked in those places?”

“Long time ago. Before I started chasing the dragon. I got one of those faces, I guess. People always say I look familiar.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

“What’s your name, honey? You never told me.”

Shawna had introduced herself to Leia in the ambulance, but wasn’t surprised that she had forgotten. “Sorry . . . I’m Shawna Hawkins.”

“Alexandra Lemke.”

Such a noble-sounding name was extremely hard to attach to this ruin of a woman. “I knew Leia was just a nickname, but . . . that’s lovely.”

“What about Shawna? Where did they get that?”

“I never knew, actually. The woman who gave birth to me picked it out, and she died just after I was born. She just passed it on to my adoptive mom.”

“She raised you, then? Your mom?”

Shawna shook her head. “She left when I was little. My dad raised me. I can’t say I’ve ever had a mother.”

Leia nodded. “That’s some bad shit.”

“Hey . . . we deal.”

“Musta been hard when you were little.”

“Well, I always tried to—”

“My mom rented me out to perverts when I was little.”

Shawna flinched. “What do you mean?”

“Sent me on dates with grown men. They messed with me and took pictures of it for paying customers. Split the profits with my folks.”

“Your father was in on it, too?”

Shawna’s reaction drew a phlegmy chortle from Leia. “Got you beat, huh?”

“Guess so.”

“Parents ain’t always a *good* thing, ya know.”

Shawna gave her a sardonic smile, feeling shamefully self-indulgent. She retreated to more practical matters. “Is there somebody I should notify, Alexandra?”

The woman frowned suspiciously. “About what?”

“About you. About your being here.” *In the event of your death* were the words she couldn’t bring herself to speak.

“Oh . . . no . . . nobody. Well, you could tell Maurice.”

“The guy who made the sign?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you said he was dead.”

“Oh, yeah . . . right.” Leia nodded slowly, tears streaming down her face.

“I’m so sorry,” said Shawna.

“Ain’t your fault,” said Leia.

A Thing About Cliffs

Mary Ann had considered defriending the Facebooker who asked her about Norman, but decided against it. Such a move would only make her look as if she had something to hide. Instead, she just deactivated the chat function. Her fear, of course, was that Fogbound One was someone who had known Norman well—or well enough to know that he'd been with Mary Ann that long-ago Christmas Eve.

Worse yet, what if this guy was a homicide cop investigating a new development in the long-cold case of Norman's disappearance?

This was paranoia, she told herself. Ben had warned her that social networking could unearth all sorts of stuff, so it wasn't *that* surprising, really, that Norman's name had surfaced. She had dated this man, after all, so lots of people could have seen them together. She and Norman had eaten at Sam Wo's in Chinatown and gone to an old movie at the Castro Theater. They had even gone trick-or-treating on Russian Hill with that poor little girl, though Mary Ann had still been clueless at the time. She'd found it endearing that this shambling sasquatch of a man would babysit for his friends. She took it as a sign of Norman's basic decency, his obvious yearning for home and family.

She had never been serious about him. He'd been forty-four, for one thing—almost twenty years older—and not all that handsome. She had seen him more as a project, a humanitarian effort. After only a year in the city, she had already had her fill of beautiful, unavailable men, so Norman, with his low self-esteem and adoring gaze, had struck her as an easy, risk-free object of her affection. Since she'd never slept with him, she'd been caught off-guard the night he'd all but proposed to her at the Beach Chalet.

She had sometimes wondered if Norman had seen her as a cure for his pedophilia, his last serious shot at a normal life. Whatever his motives, his anguish had seemed real enough when she turned him down. And it was still in his eyes on Christmas Eve when they were walking along the cliffs at the Legion of Honor and she confronted him about the disgusting magazines she'd found in his apartment. Even then, he still wanted her, still believed he could win her over, if only she would listen to his side of the story.

She'd been over this so many times in her head. Things might have been different if he hadn't been so drunk that day, if they hadn't chosen that particular path, if he hadn't stumbled and lost his footing, if he'd just *held still* when he began to slide on his back toward the precipice, if he'd worn the goddamn tie she'd bought him instead of his usual tacky clip-on, which came loose in her hand when she reached down to rescue him.

There'd been nothing to like about Norman, but she hadn't wanted him to die. She had never seen herself as someone who could flee such a terrible scene, but fate or karma or *something* had offered her a clean break, and she'd chosen to take it. There had been no witnesses, and even if Norman's body *did* wash ashore, an autopsy would reveal the huge amounts of alcohol in his blood, and the police would assume (correctly, of course) that a drunk had fallen off a cliff. So she'd taken a bus back to Barbary Lane and gone to Mrs. Madrigal's Christmas party. She'd never told anyone about it except Michael.

In the intervening years (including the dozen or so more years she'd remained in San Francisco) Mary Ann had never spoken of Norman again, and—even more damning to the memory of a dead man—not a single living soul had ever asked about him. Norman's ugly little life had left him seemingly devoid of all human connection.

Until Fogbound One.

Now Mary Ann was wondering if Norman had had a friend she'd never known about, someone who'd grown curious about his old buddy once her name had shown up on Facebook. What if he (or she) was trying to torment her about Norman's disappearance?

Or what if the police had simply found new evidence?

What if a human jawbone with an easily identifiable filling had turned up in the rocks below those cliffs?

Stop it, you ridiculous woman. Just stop it.

“See if this fits.”

Mary Ann looked up with a start from her Facebook page. Ben was holding out a puffy powder-blue ski jacket. “For Pinyon City,” he explained.

“You sure I’ll need that?”

“Oh, yeah. It gets into the twenties at night.” He smiled, revealing that delectable gap. “Didn’t you ever go to the Sierra when you lived here?”

“Not really. Well . . . once or twice, but usually in the summer. I’ve never been a skier.”

Ben guided her arms into the cushiony sleeves. “It’s a little roomy, but the color’s really good on you.”

He was right about both things. She admired herself in the mirror next to the bed, mostly to show him her appreciation. “You sure you can spare this?”

“We’ve got tons of ’em.” Ben gestured toward her laptop. “You won’t be needing that, by the way. There’s no Wi-Fi in Pinyon City.”

Her face must have betrayed her chagrin.

“Are you addicted already?”

She knew he was talking about Facebook. “Not really,” she said, lying just a little bit. “But I do wanna stay in touch with my doctor.”

Six days to go, she thought. Is this really a wise idea? Will a radical change of scenery in the middle of nowhere make the time pass slower or faster?

“No worries,” said Ben. “We usually have breakfast over in the next valley. They’ve got Wi-Fi in the café there. And we’re only gone for two nights.”

“Right . . . okay.” She folded her laptop and swaddled it in a pair of slacks before tucking it into her suitcase.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” said Ben, backing out the door. “I’ve gotta get Roman’s stuff together.”

Oh, shit. The dog.

“You knew we were bringing him, right?”

“Oh, well . . . yeah . . . I figured.”

“He lives for these trips,” said Ben. “He’s so much fun in the snow.”

“And he’s good in the car?”

“Oh yeah. He’s great.”

He was not great. He whimpered, for one thing—not loudly but steadily—for the first two hours of the trip, supposedly in anticipation of the natural wonders awaiting him. When he finally settled down, he sprawled on the seat with all the entitlement of a temple lion, his wet, black nose planted squarely on Mary Ann’s lap. She wondered if he could actually sense something, smell something—*feel her disease*, as that cryptic old Beatles song went. *How did that go? He got . . . something, something. He got feet down below his knees, hold you in his arms so you can feel his disease, come together right now . . .*

“You okay?” Michael was peering at her from the front seat.

“We’re fine.” She had answered for the dog as well, since they were a couple for the purposes of this trip, whether she liked it or not.

“I can switch with you when we stop for lunch.”

“No. I’m good.” She might have agreed had she not noticed how often Michael and Ben had reached across the coffee holders to touch each other. It was part of their road ritual. Her first husband, Brian, had been like that. Bob, of course, not so much.

Feeling a shiver of isolation, she found herself stroking the wooly head in her lap. The dog was a pretty mottled color, like an Irish cable-knit sweater, a flurry of grays and browns. She spotted a grain of crud in the corner of his eye, so she picked it out with delicate care, only to have the creature turn and lunge at her hand.

“Shit . . . sorry.”

“What happened?” Ben found her in the mirror.

“I was picking something out of his eye.”

Michael chuckled. “He wasn’t trying to hurt you. He just wanted the booger.”

“What?”

“He loves to eat eye boogers. It’s his favorite thing.”

She saw Ben shoot a peevish glance at his husband. “Michael . . . TMI.”

“And you feed them to him? Ew . . . Mouse . . . that’s disgusting. And who calls them eye boogers, anyway?”

“Who says ‘ew’ anymore?”

“Plenty of people.”

“At *our* age, I mean.”

“Our age,” she echoed flatly, shooting him a look. He had tried this several times already: invoking their common decrepitude in front of Ben, so that he, Michael, could strike the pose of the wise old sage. She wasn’t ready to claim that crown yet.

“All dogs like to do that,” Michael insisted. “It’s a natural thing. Besides, it’s neater. What did you do with it?”

“What do you mean? I flicked it away.”

“On the *floor*?”

She reached out to swat him, but he intercepted her hand and held it for a while, almost tenderly, against the snowy bristles on the back of his neck.

“You’re bad,” she said, embarrassed by the intimacy.

They stopped for lunch, as custom seemed to demand, at an In-N-Out Burger just off the freeway. It was perched on a small, barbered knoll that offered a surprisingly unspoiled view of the foothills. The air was much colder here, and the sky was as dingy as an old hankie, but there was no evidence of snow beyond a few ski-racked Outbacks in the parking lot. Some of these patrons had to be locals, she figured, given the patriotic frenzy of their bumper stickers and the sheer height of their vehicles.

For ten minutes, they went their separate ways, two- and four-legged creatures alike. While Ben was at the counter placing their orders, Michael led Roman around a plaza of asphalt-framed grass, and the lone female finally relieved herself in a restroom that was much cleaner than she’d expected. When she was done, she pushed the paper horseshoe into the toilet with the tip of her Pumas and flushed without looking. She would *not* dwell morbidly on her cancer. Dr. Ginny had laid down the law about that in their last phone conversation. *Stop horriblizing, Mary Ann. It will do you no good.*

She studied her face in a streaky mirror as she washed her hands. She’d been accused of horriblizing before—that very term, in fact—by someone else looking out for her welfare. Calliope, of course, had not been a doctor; her certification had been from a place called Coach U. *That should have been a fucking clue*, thought Mary Ann. *That should have given me the tiniest inkling that this oh-so-earnest shaman with trout pout and cone-*

shaped breasts might not be the most trustworthy keeper of my heart's secrets.

"Don't be such a horriblizer," Calliope used to say whenever Mary Ann began to fret about the world. "You're just worrying about stuff that hasn't happened yet."

Right, thought Mary Ann, drying her hands on a paper towel, *like the sight of my life coach sucking off my husband in a fancy Italian hotel. Good thing I didn't horriblize about that before it happened. Who knows where I would have gone with it.* She flung the towel into the trash and charged out of the restroom in a blind fury, nearly colliding with a balding, pink-haired old woman toting an infant in a Baby Bjorn. Outside, where a gust of cold air slapped her into a semblance of sanity, she saw that Ben had already returned to the car, so she collected herself as believably as possible before climbing into the backseat. She was instantly enveloped in a warm fog of cheeseburger smells.

"Yum," she said.

"Eat yours now," Ben told her with a wink. "It's a lot easier without the doodle in here."

"I guess I shouldn't ask," she said, unwrapping one of the burgers.

He grinned knowingly as he wiped cheese from the corner of his mouth. "It's hard to be vegetarian on the road. We let ourselves transgress when we're out of town."

"No complaints here."

"Good, aren't they?"

"Mmm."

"It's the soda cups that bother Michael."

"What's wrong with them?"

"They've got Bible verses printed on the bottom."

"Really?" Mary Ann tilted a cup to see what he meant, and proceeded, of course, to spill diet soda on her leg. "Shit," she murmured. "Shit, shit, shit."

Ben sprang from the car and opened the hatchback, returning seconds later with a ragged terrycloth towel. "It's Roman's, but it should be clean."

She thanked him and dabbed at her sodden leg, infuriated by her own stupidity, her own mindless panic.

"Do you need to change?" he asked. "I can leave for a bit."

His sweetness made her want to cry, but she held it back.

"It's okay," she said. "No big deal."

Ben smiled sleepily. "It's the one about living forever."

"What?"

"The Bible verse. John something. 'All who believe in Him shall not perish but have everlasting' . . . et cetera."

"All that's written on the bottom?"

He shook his head. "Just the chapter and verse numbers."

"But you *knew* them?"

"I Googled them."

She laughed. If Ben had been a closet believer, it would have been a revelation, since Michael had indicated that the two of them had given up on organized religion. She felt curiously let down. She wasn't all that religious herself, so it might have been useful—or comforting, anyway—if someone she knew had Wi-Fi to the Almighty.

The highway wound into the mountains so gently that she barely noticed the climb. It was not until the trees had become pointy and a boulder-strewn river was racing them through a gorge that the change was undeniable. Then, out of nowhere, filaments of snow began to lash the windshield from every direction, making even the dog take notice. Roman was sitting by the window now, enraptured by the gradual whitening of things.

"Is this the Sierras?" she asked.

"Sierra," said Michael, correcting her. "Singular. Sierra Nevada means 'snowy range.' It's plural already."

"Oh . . . pardon me."

"He does that to everyone," Ben told her.

She changed the subject. "We have chains, I take it?"

"Yeah," answered Ben, "but the snow isn't sticking yet, and we passed the checkpoint a few miles back. We should be fine."

Ben was a snowboarder, of course, so his definition of "fine" could very well differ from hers. Already she'd been horriblizing about the narrow shoulder of the road, the ominous rake of the slopes leading down to the river. She had always been a confident driver and a nervous passenger, and her not-so-latent acrophobia wasn't helping matters.

"So Pinyon City is . . . up here somewhere?"

“Well, up and then down,” said Michael.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s on the eastern side of the range. Almost in Nevada.”

“So . . . what’s the descent like?”

Smelling her distress, Michael gave her a cagey look over the seat, like a spiteful little brother. “A lot quicker, for one thing.”

She would *not* let him torment her, however playfully he’d meant it. She distracted herself with the scrolling scenery: a neon beer sign in a tavern window, a bright yellow snowplow, an archipelago of snow from an earlier snowfall, gleaming under the dark pines. But it was no use. She couldn’t stop clocking the relentless climb or the weave of the road or the ominous blossoming of caution signs.

“I take it we’re reaching the crest,” she said, as casually as possible.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Michael brightly, with barely a hint of sadism this time. “You’ll be able to see the lake. Or half of it, at least.”

She didn’t want to see half the lake. She wanted down from there as soon as possible. She hated to sound hysterical in front of Ben, but she had no choice.

“Ben . . . could you slow it down a bit?” He was going forty-five around a bend where thirty-five had been suggested, and she’d just caught a glimpse of the gaping chasm beyond the road, the instant oblivion that some people liked to call a View.

The trouble with Views was where you had to see them from.

Ben said, “No problem,” but didn’t seem to slow down much. He was a good driver, she reminded herself, and extremely careful most of the time, but knowing that did little to relieve the abject panic that was already gripping her.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m sorry. It’s not you, it’s me.”

The road leveled out, giving her a chance to breathe and loosen her viselike grip on the arm support. It didn’t last for long. Another yellow sign was screaming at her:

EXTREME CAUTION. DANGEROUS CLIFFS AHEAD.

“Jesus,” she muttered. “What cliffs? Where?”

Her answer came as soon as they rounded the bend. They were hugging the side of the mountain now. There were sheer granite cliffs above and below them, and only a stone wall—two feet high at the most—separated the right-hand lane from certain death. On the serpentine descent she saw places in the wall where the stones were missing or the mortar had been crudely patched, obviously because some poor soul hadn't heeded the warning sign, or was too drunk to notice. Her leg stiffened against phantom brakes as a warbling groan escaped from the back of her throat through clenched teeth.

"For God's sake," said Michael. "Stop with the Indian war chant." He pointed out the window. "Look! There's Tahoe."

Ben, to her horror, actually turned his head to admire the view, and she was certain she could feel the car veer in the same direction. "Ben . . . please don't do that."

"Then *you* look," said Michael. "You're missing it."

"I see it. It's beautiful."

"You're not even looking."

"I am, Mouse! Mountains, lake, snow . . . oh Jesus Fucking Christ!"

A huge, sooty Safeway truck was thundering toward them around the bend. As it passed with a ghastly whoosh, she closed her eyes and stopped breathing altogether.

"You're being silly," Michael told her like a scolding parent. "And you're not making it any easier for Ben."

"I know." She was completely mortified now. She'd always had a thing about cliffs—even before that horrific day with Norman—but she had never before exposed to it so blatantly. Maybe that was because her acrophobia had offered an acceptable outlet for the panic that had been brewing in her for days. The terror in the pit of her belly was less about the altitude than, well, the terror in the pit of her belly.

"It's almost over," Ben assured her. "It's always a little creepy the first time."

Tell me about it, she thought.

As Michael had promised, they reached the valley floor in a matter of minutes. Mary Ann was relieved to be done with her vertigo, but she'd expected more for her suffering than the free-range commerce that had

suddenly blossomed along the highway: hot tubs displayed in parking lots, spangly billboards for nightclub acts, “cyber chalets” strung with icicle lights. Not exactly honky-tonk, but not that far from the outskirts.

“Are we there yet?” she asked, hoping the answer was no.

Michael parried her query with one of his own. “Don’t you wanna stop and buy a chainsaw sculpture?”

He was enjoying this, she realized. As long as she’d known him he’d made a game out of toying with her expectations, building suspense for what lay ahead. He was like an annoying little kid leading a blindfolded friend to his secret fort in the woods.

“You’re not going to tell me a thing, are you?”

“Just soak it in, babycakes.”

“I feel like I’m being abducted.”

“Great. That’s what we’re going for.”

A green highway sign pointed the way to Pinyon City, but neither Ben nor Michael remarked upon it. This smaller road led them through a cluster of houses with suburban-looking street signs and seasonal flags flying over the garages. Within minutes, however, the houses had disappeared and they were cruising through a broad, seemingly unpopulated valley. The meadows on both sides of the road were vast and already dusted with snow; the mountains in the distance imposing but somehow incapable of menace. They embraced her, in fact, made her feel safer than she’d felt in weeks.

She remembered a magazine called *Christmas Ideals* that her grandmother had sent her every year when she was a little girl back in Cleveland. It was sturdier than most magazines, and glossy, and inside there were poems printed on scenes from nature. If she were to see one today, she would probably find it corny, but back then her easy childish heart had soared at the sight of those snow-laden pines and starlit valleys.

Ideals had been the ideal name, she realized, since what the magazine had offered was the sweet reassurance that life could not be improved upon. A pristine landscape was perfection itself; it was only when you added people that everything changed.

Maybe that’s why she was feeling so peaceful.

There was no one around. Anywhere. And the world was fading to white.

“Where did everybody go?” she asked.

“Exactly,” said Ben.

Unclean Urges

Jake was surprised when Anna told him of her plans for the afternoon. These days she rarely left the house without him, and then only for brief strolls around the neighborhood. He might have caught on to her scheme had he thought about it for a while, but he was glad to have the flat to himself, and Anna seemed excited about seeing Michael Tilson Thomas conducting something or other at Davies Hall. When she left with the upstairs neighbors, Selina and Marguerite, she was dolled up in her fanciest floral kimono and the little velvet cap that Michael had given her for her birthday.

“If you’re feeling inspired,” she told Jake, holding on to Marguerite’s arm, “Notch’s litter box could use a little freshening. Otherwise, enjoy yourself, dear. We won’t be home until after dinner.”

He watched from the door as the three of them—all moving at Anna’s speed—headed down the street toward the Muni Metro station. When they were out of sight, Notch approached and did her little leg-rubbing dance, so he took it as his cue to grab a bag of Feline Pine from its usual spot beside the washer. The ammonia smell stung his nostrils as he twist-tied the heavy bag of dirty litter and moved it, gingerly, to the trash. As he replaced the litter, Notch sat perfectly still on the kitchen counter, watching the operation with the air of a rich lady keeping an eye on her housekeeper.

So now what? With Anna at the symphony and Michael in the mountains for two days, Jake’s major responsibilities were gone. He considered raking the soggy bamboo leaves from the terrace, but that would feel too much like his day job, so he settled on watching television. Anna had never cared for television (“except in times of national emergency”), so, despite the fact that the set was in his bedroom, he tried not to watch it

when she was around. You could hear it all the way down the hall, so it would have been disrespectful to invade her space like that, considering the preciousness of her days. But sometimes, thanks to TiVo, when Anna was visiting her acupuncturist, or camped out on a bench in the art museum, he could steal a few guiltless moments in bed with ESPN.

He had already watched two satisfying hours of soccer when the doorbell rang. By the time he'd pulled on his sweats and considered the usual suspects—Jehovah's Witnesses, delivery dykes, neighbors with flyers for poetry jams—another possibility had presented itself. A glimpse through the window confirmed the worst.

The Mormon kid. Jonah Flake.

Jake sighed and opened the door. He waited for the intruder to speak.

"Your grandmother said you'd be home today."

"My grandmother."

"The elderly lady. Whatever. She called herself your roommate. I figured she was kidding." A crooked smile split the soft, round peach of Jonah's face.

Jake just stood there.

"Dude . . . can I come in?"

"Not if you're packing a Bible."

Jonah grinned and held up his hands as proof. "I'm totally clean." He cocked an ear toward the hallway. "Is that soccer?"

"Yeah."

"AC Milan?"

This is what they do, thought Jake. Find something they have in common with you and use it to get their foot in the door.

"Listen, man, I hafta tell you, you're wasting your time if—"

"It's not that, dude. I need your help."

Jake was thrown by the urgency in the kid's eyes. "My help?"

"I'd rather tell you inside, if that's okay."

"Well . . . we gotta make it quick . . . I don't wanna miss this match." This was bullshit, of course, since Jake could watch the match whenever he wanted, but he needed an easy way out if Jonah tried to get all churchy on him again. "You can sit over there," he told Jonah, gesturing to Anna's armchair.

The kid sat down, but only on the edge of the chair, and his back remained unnaturally straight. He might as well have had a Bible on his knee.

“So wassup, Elder Flake?”

Jonah flinched as if he’d been slapped.

“That’s what you call yourself, right? When you’re a missionary?”

“That’s not what I am today.”

“Okay . . . whatever.”

The kid was quiet for a moment. “The thing is, Jake, I have the same urges you did. Toward men, I mean.”

This wasn’t exactly news. The kid had practically said as much on Forbes Island. “But you don’t act on them. You’ve got . . . whatshername now.”

“Becky. Yeah, I love her . . . for sure. She’s a wonderful girl. But I still have these feelings. I pray for them to go away, but it’s a struggle. It’s the biggest struggle of my whole life, but I’m making it for Heavenly Father.” The kid’s big gray eyes were damp now. “But sometimes it’s like . . . there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Oh shit, thought Jake. *So that’s where this is going.*

“It’s not like I wasn’t prepared. I was. I knew that a place like San Francisco would put me in the path of temptation. But sometimes when I meet somebody new, the urges get too much for me and . . .”

The kid didn’t finish the sentence, so Jake tried to spare them both the embarrassment. “Jonah . . . dude . . . I’m really flattered, but I don’t think that sexually you and me would be—”

“No! I don’t mean you!”

The response was so fierce that Jake couldn’t help but feel stung by it. “Okay, man . . . cool . . . whatever.”

“No offense . . . you’re handsome and all, but you’re more like a friend. I just meant . . . I met this dude at Starbucks today, and he asked me to go home with him.”

Jake took that in. “I thought you guys couldn’t drink coffee.”

“What guys?”

“Mormons.”

“I was having a brownie.”

“So . . . what? . . . You had sex with this dude, and you’re feeling guilty now.”

“No. I told him no. I said it was against my faith.”

“Well . . . there you go. Nothing to be worried about. Your sacred purity is intact.”

“But . . . I’m still feeling the urges. I haven’t stopped feeling them for the past two hours.”

“Then go back and fuck him. Get over yourself, dude. Get over your damn faith. It’s gonna kill you.”

The kid looked devastated. “Haven’t you ever had something you wanted to change . . . and you couldn’t . . . and it made you feel like a crazy person?”

Oh, one little thing, thought Jake.

“If you don’t wanna help—”

“I just tried to, Jonah. I gave you my best advice. What else could I possibly do?”

Jonah hesitated, his fingertips fidgeting at his temple, where a sprinkling of acne betrayed his idling adolescence. He seemed to be weighing something.

“It’s gonna sound wack,” he said.

“Try me.”

“I need you to hold me.”

Jake just blinked at him.

“It’s part of my therapy. Back in Snowflake my therapist does it, but I don’t know anybody here besides the other elders, and I don’t . . . they don’t know about my, you know . . . You don’t have to, dude, if you don’t—”

“Your therapist *holds* you?”

“It’s called touch therapy. I’m supposed to do it when I feel unclean urges. He says the urges come to me because my dad was so distant, so . . . if I can find a man to hold me, I’ll be getting what I want, and sex won’t have to be part of it. He says gay men really just want strong masculine love.”

Jake remembered now. He’d seen this on a CNN report about ex-gays: one grown man holding another on his lap, rocking him like a baby, stroking his head.

“Is this guy like . . . a therapist therapist?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like . . . a psychiatrist or something?”

Jonah shrugged. “He’s a reparative therapist . . . a highly respected LDS leader. He went through this himself. Personally.”

“He’s gay, you mean.”

“Was. He’s married and has kids now. Listen, dude . . . it was wrong of me to ask. You’ve made your own choices. You’ve got your life worked out.”

Right, thought Jake.

The kid stood up, stumbling a little, obviously embarrassed. He headed for the door, looking much more rejected than Jake had felt moments earlier.

“What the hell,” said Jake.

Jonah turned. “What?”

“What do I have to do? Do I have to talk?”

“You’ll do it?”

“I’ll give it a shot.”

The kid’s peachy face went red with relief. Or gratitude. Or something.

He blushes like I do, thought Jake.

“You don’t have to say anything at all,” Jonah assured him. “You can watch the match, if you want.”

“The TV’s in the bedroom, dude.”

“That’s okay. I trust you.”

“We keep our clothes on, right?”

“Totally.”

Jake led the way to the bedroom—and the bed—where he propped pillows against the headboard and let Jonah lie against his chest. Jake wondered what to do with his hands, until Jonah guided him, placing one of them behind his own head and the other on his waist. He did this with such practiced authority that Jake was reminded of a ballroom dance class he had endured one summer as a kid in Oklahoma. Only then he had been the one with a hand on his waist.

“So this is it?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“How long do we do it?”

“Ten or fifteen minutes . . . usually. As long as it takes for the urges to pass.”

Jake felt another twinge of resentment toward this unforgettable stud from Starbucks, then made himself let it go. “Just lemme know, dude.”

“You can rock me, if you don’t mind. That’s part of it.”

So that’s what happened. Jonah lay there in Jake’s arms, his body pulsing with warmth, his thick, wheat-colored hair smelling of coconut gel, while Jake watched AC Milan lay waste to Livorno. Since Jonah couldn’t see the TV screen, the undulating roar of the crowd and Jake’s own yelps of support sometimes stirred his curiosity.

“Was that Ronaldinho?”

“Yeah. Fucking brilliant block.”

“Ronaldinho rules,” said Jonah.

“Word,” said Jake, rocking away.

Time passed, but Jake could not have said how much. He was lost in the easy communion of bodies breathing in unison, like those sea lions hauling out at Pier 39. This experience could have made him crave sex, but it didn’t; it just calmed him, released him from the usual expectations, the usual guilt. He had never lied to Jonah, and Jonah was getting the cure he’d been prescribed: tenderness from a masculine heart without the danger of lust. Hell, there wasn’t even the danger of dick. Jonah was getting a deal.

The doorbell rang.

“Shit,” he said, throwing Jonah off his chest.

The kid, naturally, looked rattled. “You expecting somebody?”

“No.”

“What about your grandmother?”

Jake didn’t bother to correct him again. “She’s not coming back until dark.” He left the bed, heading for the door.

“Wait,” cried Jonah. “It could be one of the elders.”

“How the fuck could it be one of the elders?”

The kid looked sheepish. “I gave the address to a buddy of mine.”

“Why?”

“Just . . . you know . . . in case of emergency. They like to know where we are.”

It was ridiculous how guilty the two of them were acting, so Jake tried to be the voice of reason. “Just stay put. I’ll take care of it.”

Closing the bedroom door behind him, he headed for the front door. Through the peephole he saw Shawna Hawkins, the daughter of Michael’s old business partner, Brian Hawkins. Shawna was another of Anna’s chosen “grandchildren”—a lively, dark-eyed girl a few years younger than Jake and more than a few inches taller. She had changed her hair; her shiny retro bangs had given way to a shorter, simpler cut.

He opened the door. “Hey there.”

She seemed unusually subdued. There were dark circles under her eyes. “Sorry to show up unannounced, Jake. I really need to talk to Anna.”

“She’s at the Symphony,” he told her. “She won’t be back till dinnertime.”

“Shit.”

She looked so disappointed that Jake couldn’t leave it at that. “Is there something I can do?”

“No . . . I just, you know . . . need me some Anna.”

“Right. Well, maybe this evening . . .”

His nervousness wasn’t lost on Shawna. “You’ve got someone with you.”

“No . . . not really.”

“Yeah, you do.” She smiled conspiratorially. “That’s great. Don’t let me intrude.” Shawna, like Anna, took more than a passing interest in Jake’s love life—such as it was. Shawna could handle this situation better than anyone Jake knew—she wrote a sex blog, after all—but her assumptions were already making him uncomfortable. He wondered exactly what sort of Olympian fuck-fest she’d been picturing.

“I’ll check back later,” she said. “I’ve got some errands to run anyway, so . . . oh . . . sorry to barge in like this.”

This second apology puzzled Jake until he turned to find Jonah standing behind him.

“No sweat,” Jonah told Shawna, before turning to Jake. “Talk to you later, dude.”

“Please don’t leave on my account,” Shawna said, as Jonah made his escape down the passageway to the street.

When he was out of earshot, Shawna widened her eyes. “Adorable. Now I *really* feel bad.”

“Don’t,” said Jake. “It was nothing.”

But it hadn’t been, he realized; it had definitely not been nothing.

Refuge Once Removed

Pinyon City, she realized, had never been anything like a city. The highway and the main street were one and the same, and downtown, if you could call it that, consisted of a general store, a real estate office, a restaurant/saloon, and a derelict mini-mall that, according to a flaking sign, had been the “Sierra Meadow Wellness Center” in an earlier incarnation. The village was tiny, and virtually free of traffic, since two of the high-pass roads leading into it were closed during the winter. The one road in use—the one they’d just come down—was already velvety with snow. The whole effect was otherworldly.

Ben pulled the car off the road across from the general store.

“How’s that for parking karma?” he asked, grinning over the seat at Mary Ann.

She wasn’t sure what he meant until Michael climbed from the car and began unloading their bags from the hatchback. They had apparently parked directly in front of their accommodations—a matchbox of a bungalow, probably from the forties, encircled by a charmless aluminum fence. The sight of it sent Roman into fits of ecstasy.

“Just head on in,” Michael told her. “We’ll bring your stuff.”

“Won’t I need a key?”

“It should be open. They leave the key inside.”

So she led the way into the house, passing first through an unheated mudroom with a four-foot patchwork unicorn standing sentry at another door. Beyond that, she found the main room: a relentlessly plain but serviceable space painted a serviceable shade of cream. There was a battered upright piano, a large refectory table, and a cluster of kitschy but comfortable-looking eighties furniture. Someone had clearly anticipated

their arrival, because an electric wall-heater was already droning away in the corner.

Roman shot past her into the room, touching base with other doors leading to other rooms—the bedrooms, presumably—as if systematically checking items off his arrival list. Mary Ann was charmed by his excitement, even found it a little contagious, until the dog stopped cold, hunched his back, and began heaving on the carpet.

“Oh, baby,” she said. “Did you get carsick?”

The dog had coughed up a few blades of grass (from his pit stop at the In-N-Out Burger, no doubt), so Mary Ann hurried off to the kitchen for a wad of paper towels. When she returned, Roman was standing uncharacteristically still in the middle of the room. A thick rope of slime, viscous as an egg white, was dangling from his shiny black lips. Hearing Mary Ann approach, he turned his head slowly and regarded her with blank-eyed bafflement, as if seeing a human being for the first time.

Then, suddenly, he dropped to the floor, his legs stiffening grotesquely in a series of spasms, his mouth foaming, his black marble eyes showing crescents of white.

“Oh, fuck . . . oh shit . . .” Mary Ann cried, just as the guys came staggering in with the luggage. “Something’s happened to him, Ben.”

Ben dropped his bags and rushed to kneel by the quivering dog. “It’s okay, Roman, we’re here. That’s a good boy. That’s a very good boy.” He looked up at Michael with the sober calm of a paramedic. “Is there anything in the fridge?”

“I doubt it. Unless maybe the last people . . . wait!” Michael scrambled out the front door and came back, seconds later, holding a clump of compacted snow in both hands. He dropped to the floor and pressed the snow against the base of the dog’s spine.

Roman was still shaking violently. “Hang on, Mr. Doodle, we’re almost there.”

Feeling useless, Mary Ann stayed out of the way as Ben and Michael cooed to the dog. When the spasms finally stopped, Roman just lay there panting. The dry air was spiked with the smells of bile and urine: the melting snow had formed a dark green continent on the light green carpet. Michael gazed up at her. “You should go to the bedroom. Close the door behind you.”

“If there’s anything I can do . . .” Roman began to snarl through clenched teeth.

“Go, Mary Ann! It’s Cujo time!”

This was all the shorthand she needed. She bolted for the nearest door and slammed it behind her, only to watch it spring open again as Ben and Michael joined her. The dog was barking like a fiend now, just beyond the door, knocking over lamps and end tables as it thrashed about the room in a seeming fury. “He’s blind right now,” Ben explained. “He knows that he lost it somehow, but he doesn’t know what’s happened.”

Neither did Mary Ann, of course.

“A grand mal seizure,” Michael explained. “He’s epileptic. This is called the postictal period. We have to stay away from him until it passes.”

She asked how long that might be.

Michael shrugged. “Hard to call. Whenever he calms down.”

Mary Ann felt wobbly, so she sank to the edge of the bed and tried to soothe herself with the thrift-shop art over the dresser: an incongruous tropical beach scene.

Seeing her rattled state, Ben sat next to her and took her hand.

“Welcome to Pinyon City, Mary Ann.”

Ten minutes later, the guys left on an exploratory mission, closing the bedroom door behind them. She heard them speak softly to the dog for several minutes before Ben summoned her to join them. Roman was stretched out on the sofa now; Ben and Michael were sitting on the floor next to him. “It’s okay,” said Michael. “It’s over.”

The dog looked up as she approached, flapping his plummy tail against the sofa cushions in weary recognition. “Yeah,” said Ben. “There’s Mary Ann. She’s back.” He smiled at Mary Ann. “He always does that afterwards. He takes a head count.”

She was touched, somehow, to be one of the heads that Roman would count.

“Poor little boy,” she said, sitting on the floor next to Michael. She reached out and held one of the dog’s paws. The pads were enormous, the size of pennies, as dark as charcoal and almost as rough. His breath was foul, but she didn’t mind.

Michael stroked Roman's side methodically, as if grooming a horse. "Look at him checking things out. He's like Dorothy after the tornado. 'I had the strangest dream, Auntie Em. And you were there . . . and you . . . and you.'"

Mary Ann smiled at her old friend. Was there still nothing in Michael's life that couldn't evoke a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*?

"How often does this happen?" she asked him.

"Only twice before. The last one was four months ago. We've got him on meds, but . . . maybe we'll have to increase the dosage." He cast a questioning glance at Ben.

"What causes it?" she asked.

"His is hereditary," Ben answered. "His mother had an epileptic pup in an earlier litter."

"Did you know that when you bought him?"

"No, but . . . really . . . what are you gonna do? He belonged to us the moment we picked him up. Didn't you, Mr. Dood?" Ben looked down tenderly at the exhausted dog. Mary Ann thought she saw him get misty-eyed, but he shifted almost immediately to a breezier tone. "So what do you think, you gnarly beast? Is it time for a bath?"

Roman scrambled to his feet with the ungainly zeal of a newborn colt, that gross string of saliva still swinging from his lips, though this time it verged on the comical.

"I take it he likes baths," she said.

"Oh, hell, yeah," said Michael. "Anything to do with water. Wait'll you see him in the snow. He's a total fiend."

As the guys led Roman to the bathtub, Mary Ann found herself envying the dog his blithe amnesia, the apparent ease with which he'd let go of something awful. He had endured a grand mal seizure—the perfectly named Big Bad—but the only thing on his mind now was the prospect of a warm bath and, maybe later, the pleasures of snow.

I used to be that, she thought.

She was offered her choice of bedrooms, so she took the smaller one at the back of the house. It overlooked a meandering creek lined with chalet-style cabins. There was gray smoke curling from one of the chimneys and, somewhere farther down the valley, a dog barking erratically, but few other

signs of habitation. She unzipped the duffel bag the guys had given her for the trip and arranged her things methodically on white plastic hangers in an otherwise empty closet. There wasn't much to unpack; she was traveling even lighter now for this escape from her escape, this refuge once removed.

When she joined the guys again, they were in the kitchen loading groceries into a rusty old Buick of a refrigerator. (Ben had brought along several tote bags of leafy green vegetables, primordial-looking and streaked with red cartilage, like pterodactyl wings.) Roman was lapping water from a stainless steel bowl they'd also imported from the city.

"I'm making coffee," said Ben. "Do you take cream?"

"If you have it," she said.

"We don't, actually. And we could use some mustard. Do you think you could make a run to the general store?"

It was such a quaint thing to be asked—so absurdly *Little House on the Prairie*—that she smiled. "Across the road, you mean?"

"Do it," said Michael. "It's a trip."

So she put on her borrowed ski jacket and headed through the swirling snow to the store. The few cars that were parked along the road, their own included—were already morphing into giant white tortoises; the only color remaining in the landscape was the blue-and-red glow of a Pepsi machine on the porch of the store.

She tugged open the door and entered a fetchingly decrepit scene: slanting floors, pegboards hung with fishing lures, a dormant potbellied stove serving as a perch for the resident cat. It might have been something out of Norman Rockwell if not for the glass-fronted freezers full of packaged pizzas and, mounted above the checkout counter, a flat-screen TV set on mute, with subtitled carnage from a car bombing in Iran. *Why would you want that here?* she wondered, until she saw the look of leaden boredom on the face of the young cashier. He was like some heartsick captive creature in a roadside zoo.

And apparently he'd been alone until her arrival.

"Wow," she said, brushing the snow off her jacket. "It's really starting to come down."

"Don't worry, lady. You'll be able to get out. The plow comes through this evening."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I like the snow, actually."

He grunted noncommittally.

“We’re staying across the road,” she added with growing discomfort. “That little rental house? It’s very sweet. This is such a charming town.”

Another grunt. “Anything in particular you’re lookin’ for?”

She shook her head. “I’d just like to browse, thanks.” She didn’t like this kid’s energy, and she didn’t like to be called “lady,” so she chose not to squander another moment in conversation. Still, to keep from looking like a fraud, she had to make a show of “browsing,” so she began meandering through that tilty-floored room, stopping to admire things that would never normally attract her attention. A box of jackknives, for example, and a creaky carousel of Day-Glo postcards emblazoned with flaming skulls.

Michael had been right; the place was a trip, a head-on collision of country funk and city demands. There was an alcove to one side, an obvious add-on to the original building, that did its best to impersonate a wine cellar, complete with an arbor of dusty plastic grapes. There was even an “antique nook”—a sad collection of cobalt medicine bottles and horseshoes—but she could smell mold from the door, so she didn’t go in.

She found the condiments on a scantily stocked shelf near the back of the store. There were two squeeze bottles of Grey Poupon, amazingly enough, so she took one, then headed toward the freezers for the half-and-half. The cashier was dealing with someone else now, laconically ringing up an order, so she lurked out of sight to avoid further awkward transactions. The funny thing was: she’d heard no one else enter the store. She had to assume this other customer had been shopping in the antique nook.

She waited for proof of the customer’s exit—the telltale jingle of the cowbells on the back of the front door—before bringing her items to the desk. She wondered how she’d become like this: afraid of everything and everyone, even herself. Cancer and infidelity were two good answers, except for the fact that her failure of nerve had come to her long before those particular calamities. Once, when she was younger, she would have stopped at nothing to charm this cashier—even *after* he’d been so rude to her—just to prove that, deep down, people were decent, and, even more important, that she was.

She no longer had the energy for that tiresome dance.

She paid for the items in cash without saying a word, mostly to see if the guy could complete the transaction in total silence. He did, and she

wasn't surprised. She stuffed the mustard and the half-and-half carton into the pockets of her jacket and left the building. It was already dusk, so she stopped on the porch to study the nondescript house across the street, her harbor for the next two nights. She could see someone moving about in the living room—Michael, it looked like—and there was light spilling from the windows onto the new-fallen snow. It felt like spying on someone else's life.

It took her a while to notice the footprints leading from the store to the end of the block. There, next to the restaurant, she finally saw the other shopper, a slow-moving figure in a dark overcoat and a brimmed hat, hunching into the snow on his way home to somewhere. She could feel the bite of the wind now, so she tugged tight the hood of her jacket and proceeded to trudge toward the house. She was almost across the road when the all-but-soundless landscape was pierced by the hideous howl of an animal—a dog, she supposed, though, in these parts, according to Michael, it could just as easily be a coyote. They howled out of loneliness, apparently, and sometimes to celebrate a kill.

She turned in the direction of the howl, but there were no four-legged creatures in sight, only the anonymous person from the store. She stopped long enough to see that he had also been stopped in his tracks by the sound and was facing in her direction now. He was featureless at that distance, a solitary exclamation mark against the blank white page of the road, but she felt a certain primal kinship with him, this fellow traveler pricking his ears to an ominous call from the wild. Instinctively, she raised a gloved hand to mark their shared moment, as if to say: *Yes, stranger, I heard it, too.*

But he didn't return the salute; he just stood there looking at her, perfectly still for the longest time. Then he arched his neck to the darkening sky and released a second, even more sinister howl.

When he walked away, she began to run.

"You must've heard him," she said. "It was almost triumphant." She was standing in the kitchen with the guys now, still panting a little, the snow still melting on her jacket. Ben was sautéing onions in a battered wok, while Michael, under Ben's occasional instruction, was dicing a Japanese eggplant at the kitchen table.

"*Triumphant?*" asked Michael.

“You know. Like a coyote celebrating a kill.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “I should never have told you that.”

“You’re stoned,” she said dismissively, having noticed his vaporizer on the refectory table. It must have been the very first thing he’d unpacked. She turned to Ben instead. “You heard it, right?”

“Sorry.” Ben tapped the scalloped yellow vent over the electric stove. “This thing roars like a blast furnace. Are you sure he was howling *at* you?”

“He was looking at me, and he was howling like a werewolf. He did it the second time, I think, just so I could see that he was doing it.”

Michael looked up from his dicing. “You should probably take it as a compliment.”

“Really,” she said with murder in her eyes. “A compliment.”

“Sure.”

“Remind me not to hire you at a rape crisis center.”

“When have you *ever* worked at a rape crisis center?”

“Hang on.” Ben held up his hand like a crossing guard, silencing Michael, before turning to Mary Ann with an appeasing smile. “You should know . . . howling is fairly common around here.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “A lot of bikers stop at the saloon. They’re just tourists like the rest of us, but they can get a little . . . piggy sometimes about women. Some of them. Up until a few years ago, they were stapling bras to the ceiling of the saloon.”

“Lovely,” she said.

“To be fair,” said Michael, “it was the *women* who did the stapling. It wasn’t like a gang rape or something. They were totally in on the gig.”

“Who told you that?” asked Ben.

“Bernice.”

“Bernice?”

“From the county office. The one who makes that ugly shit with yarn.”

“Oh, God, yeah.”

Mary Ann was annoyed by this diversion, since it was clear now that her scary episode had yet to be taken seriously. “This guy seemed way too old for a biker.”

“You haven’t seen our bikers,” said Michael.

“*Your* bikers?”

“He thinks he lives here already.” Ben had turned to wink at her as he stirred the onions. “We humor him as much as possible.”

“Anyway,” she went on, “he wasn’t coming out of the saloon. He was coming out of the store.”

“Right,” said Michael. “Where he’d just bought a couple of Sara Lee chocolate pies because he’d already gotten hammered at the saloon.”

“Okay, smart-ass, then what?”

“What do you mean?”

“Gimme the scenario, Mouse. He spots me crossing the street in a fucking snowstorm . . . this silver-haired fifty-seven-year-old woman—”

“C’mon,” grinned Ben. “You know that men still notice you.”

“No . . . I don’t . . . I don’t know that at all.”

“Well,” said Michael, “you still have your teeth. That counts for a whole lot around here.”

She laughed in spite of herself. Then, because Michael had never once looked up from his chopping during this exchange, she yanked a glove from her pocket and hurled it at him. It fell short of his smirking face, which was what she’d been aiming for.

“She’s thrown down the gauntlet,” said Michael.

“That’s right, you little turd.”

“Look who’s picked it up.” Ben was now pointing to Roman, who was prancing triumphantly out of the room with the five-fingered treat in his jaws.

Michael went after him, laughing. When he was out of the room, Ben shoehorned in a moment for just the two of them. “Don’t take it personally, Mary Ann.”

“Oh, I don’t. I’ve known him too long for that.”

“No. I mean . . . the howler. It probably wasn’t about you at all.” Ben cast his eyes toward the window, toward somewhere-out-yonder, then lowered his voice as if somewhere-out-yonder might be listening. “There’s meth in them thar hills.”

She nodded soberly. “So tell me again why you love this place.”

He smiled just enough to reveal that beguiling gap between his teeth, the gap she’d explored vicariously when she’d first imagined Ben and Michael in the throes of sex. The thought of that made her squirm, knowing

them as she did now, but she had definitely gone there, semi-incestuously, in her head.

“We’ll get an early start in the morning,” he said. “You can see for yourself.”

Look Again

It was twilight when Shawna returned to Anna's flat. Jake met her in front and led the way down the passageway past the furred antlers of the air plants on the wall of the house next door. This sliver of green offered only a dim echo of the garden Anna had presided over on Barbary Lane. Shawna remembered that paradise well—and how wildly her heart would race as she ran across the courtyard to show Anna her latest treasure: a rock, a seashell, an ivory elephant her dad had bought her in Chinatown.

Her heart was racing now, for entirely different reasons.

And the “treasure” in her knapsack was anything but.

“She’s expecting you,” Jake told her. “She’s been looking forward to it.”

Shawna almost apologized for disrupting Jake's afternoon tryst, until it occurred to her that he might not want to discuss it, whatever the outcome had been. How easy could it be to be him? If Jake was shy, it was mostly because he'd been burned in his search for a man who would love (and desire!) the man he wanted to be. Shawna's own appetites were catholic—as she liked to put it in her blog—but her body and her gender had never warred with each other. Even when wearing a strap-on and pounding her sweet hippie boo into his futon, she'd never felt like anything but a girl.

Maybe that was why she loved coming here. Not just because of Anna, though Anna's loving counsel had certainly been part of it, but because both these singular souls, by their very existence, challenged Shawna's comfortable assumptions about what it meant to be male or female. They compelled her, if only temporarily, to live in the genderless neutrality of the human heart.

Jake was leading her to the backyard, she realized.

“What’s happening here?” She had just spotted a whimsical wooden structure she didn’t recognize, an enclosed gazebo with a pointed roof.

“I guess you haven’t been here for a while.”

“Well . . . a month or so, I guess.” She knew Jake hadn’t meant to make her feel guilty, but she had gone there anyway, all on her own. A month was too long to risk at this stage of Anna’s life. Anna deserved better from a member of her “logical family”—Anna’s pet term for her chosen brood—logical, that is, as opposed to biological.

But Anna was still there, bundled up in a black fur blanket, looking like a dowager empress trying out a brand-new throne. Shawna leaned down and kissed her cool, dry cheek. “So soft and cozy,” she said, caressing the blanket.

“It’s not real,” said Anna. “Don’t fret.”

“I did wonder.”

“Don’t be silly. Jake got it for me at the Pottery Shed.”

“Barn,” said Jake, winking at Shawna.

“Did you do this all yourself?” asked Shawna, perusing the gazebo with genuine admiration.

Jake shrugged sheepishly. “Don’t look too close at it.”

“No, Jake. It’s a total work of art.”

He was actually blushing, she realized. “I’ll leave you two to talk,” he mumbled, before tromping back to the house.

Shawna pulled off her backpack and set it on the floor with unnatural care, as if it contained a nest of sleeping rattlesnakes. She perched on the edge of the chair and took Anna’s hand as she cut to the chase: “I just lost someone,” she said, as unhysterically as possible. “It hit me kind of hard. I need to talk to you about it.”

Anna winced in sympathy. “Not the young man on the unicycle?”

This made Shawna smile. Anna had referred to Otto as “the young man on the unicycle” ever since she’d seen him perform one sunny afternoon at the Now and Zen Fest in the park. “No, he’s perfectly fine,” Shawna assured her. “I just left his place.” She wondered if Anna had remained benignly ignorant of Otto’s name because she’d somehow divined that Shawna wasn’t serious about him—at least not *serious* serious.

“This was someone I didn’t know well,” Shawna explained. “She was homeless. We saved her life, I think, for a little while . . . so it was hard to

see her go.”

Anna nodded. “Of course.”

Shawna told the story from the beginning: that first day under the freeway, the eye-catching MAMA sign, Shawna’s inexplicable bond with Leia, the obsessive search that led to Cossack Alley, the knife attack, the ambulance ride to the hospital, the flesh-eating disease, the monstrous strangers who had rented Alexandra as a child.

“Unthinkable,” said Anna.

“That’s the word,” said Shawna.

“So they never . . . took off the leg?”

Shawna shook her head. “She was adamant about it . . . and it was too late, anyway. She was too far gone.”

“When did she die?”

“Last night. Late. I should have been there.”

“No, dear. You did well. You were the angel who took her home.”

Briskly, with a lopsided smile, Shawna brushed away a tear. “They asked me if I wanted her things. I didn’t even know she *had* things.” She picked up her knapsack and removed the revelatory item she’d brought with her: a *Star Wars* lunch box so rusty and battered that Princess Leia’s face was all but obliterated. “She kept her cash strapped to her leg—and the knife, of course—but this is where she kept her memories. The guy who was guarding her cardboard box brought it to the hospital this morning.”

Shawna opened the lunch box and removed one of the photos, holding it out for Anna to examine. “She worked in the East Bay for a while. That’s the Fabric Barn, I guess, judging from those bolts of cloth.”

“Lovely,” said Anna, and she wasn’t just being gracious. The young woman behind the counter was a stunning brunette with a sparkling smile. When Shawna first saw the photo, it had taken her a while to connect this Alexandra with the wretch she’d met under the freeway, but there had been no denying that it was the same person. It pleased Shawna that Anna would never know anything but this version of the woman, that Alexandra’s beauty was still intact in the eyes of someone who had never known her.

“And here she is as a little girl,” said Shawna, trying to sound matter-of-fact, because this image, the one with “me” inscribed crudely on the back, was the one that was flooding her mind with nameless dread. The photo had lost all its colors except orange and green. Little Alexandra was wearing a

dirndl and standing alone at a window. She wasn't smiling in this picture; she looked completely miserable, in fact.

"She looks like Heidi," said Anna, choosing to focus on the dress.

"Look again."

Anna pulled a pair of reading glasses from the depths of the fur-free blanket and maneuvered them, shakily, onto her face. "She doesn't seem happy, does she?"

"Look at the background. That's Alcatraz, right? And look at that railing outside the window. And that little plywood terrace."

Anna nodded but said nothing.

"It's the pentshack, isn't it?" This was their common term for the studio on the roof of 28 Barbary Lane. Anna had rented it out to tenants, but Shawna had been allowed to play there whenever the place was empty. It had been her secret castle in the sky.

"Well, it's certainly Russian Hill," Anna conceded. "But it can't be the pentshack."

"Why not?"

Anna shrugged. "Because there were never children living there."

Shawna looked at her. "Maybe not *living* there."

It didn't take long for this darkness to find its way onto Anna's face. "Oh," she murmured.

"Didn't my father live there?"

Silence.

"He was seeing Mary Ann, right? She used to sleep over there sometimes. Before they got married and adopted me. He told me so himself."

"Well . . . yes, but it was also the TV room for a long time, so . . . dear, I hope you're not suggesting—"

"No, of course not!" Shawna snapped. "I'm just trying to figure this out!" She was starting to sound like a waterboarder at Guantanamo, so she returned the snapshot to the lunch box and softened her tone considerably. "Sorry. My nerves are kinda frayed."

Anna's wheels seemed already to be turning. "When was that taken?"

"I'm guessing late seventies. Maybe a little earlier."

"Why are you guessing that?"

“Because she looks to be about seven or eight, and the coroner said she was barely past forty when she died. If that.” Shawna was trying hard to absorb this fact herself, reckoning with the bitter truth that Alexandra had only recently achieved middle age. “Plus,” she added, “the photo has that orangey seventies look.”

Anna was no longer listening, just blinking into the distance, engrossed in some flickering old movie of her life. After a moment she said: “Mr. Williams.”

“What?”

“He lived in the pentshack for about six months. He was a private detective. My wife—my ex-wife—hired him to track me down and spy on me.”

“Did you ever see him—?”

“—with a child? No. Never. He was a mean, conniving little man . . . he tried to blackmail someone . . . that I was seeing at the time and had grown very close to, but I never saw any evidence that . . .” Anna’s words trailed off feebly.

“But he might have been capable, right?”

Anna nervously rearranged the folds of her throw. “I can’t imagine *anyone* being capable of that. Much less under my roof.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. He got very drunk one Christmas Eve, and he never came back.”

“*Ever?*”

Anna shook her head slowly. “We called the police after a week or so, but nothing came of it. I always assumed he skipped town once his cover was blown.”

Anna’s crime-fiction lingo made Shawna grin.

“What?” asked Anna. “That’s what they say, isn’t it?”

“That’s what they say.”

Anna regarded her with grandmotherly concern. “I hope you’re feeling better, dear. You had me worried.”

“I just don’t understand, that’s all.”

“Understand what?”

“Why the universe hands me such random shit.”

Anna’s smile was inscrutable. “Sometimes the universe has a slow day.”

Not long after dark, back at Otto's cramped studio in the Crocker Amazon, Shawna provided her own coda to the saga that had consumed her for weeks.

"I've asked them to give us the ashes," she said. She was lying naked on Otto's futon, her head resting on the warm slab of his chest, trying to find her way back to the ordinary and the beautiful.

"Cool," he said. "What do you wanna do with 'em?"

"I thought we could take them to the headlands when the weather gets better. Or maybe the park. Stow Lake or something."

"Totally."

They were both silent for a while as she rode the rhythm of Otto's heart, drugged by his ripe, cedary essence. It was raining now, so hard she could hear it, and there were fat droplets, like beads of mercury, rolling down the security bars in the window.

Otto said: "I have to tell you something."

She thought she'd heard guilt in his voice. "Oh, yeah?" she said, bracing herself for another unpleasant surprise, another shitstorm out of nowhere.

He pulled her closer until she was straddling his leg like a koala on a tall, skinny tree. Finally he said: "I went to see Alexandra last night."

She was infinitely relieved. "That's it?" She had planned to stop by the hospital herself, but she'd already committed to a reading at "Writers with Drinks" and hadn't wanted to disappoint her friend Charlie, who hosted the event. "Why is that something you have to tell me? That's wonderful, Otto. She had company before she died."

"I dunno . . . you were sort of funny about it before."

"Funny about it? I asked you to be part of it."

"Yeah, but . . . just me."

It took her a moment to get it. "You took Sammy, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Of course he'd taken the monkey. Sammy was Otto's envoy, the purest and deepest expression of his heart. It shamed her to think that she'd denied him the use of that silent language. She scooped her hand up his leg and cupped his junk, loving its silken familiarity, the reassurance of her own puppet pal. "Was she aware of you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"She wasn't when I was there."

“I think she may have smiled once.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Whatever.”

“No. It’s good, baby.”

“It was good for me,” he said.

An Old Familiar Impatience

“Why is the water yellow?” Mary Ann asked, wrinkling her nose.

It was barely nine a.m., and the three of them were standing on the edge of the hot springs that Ben had been raving about since breakfast. It was not what she’d imagined. It looked like a smallish suburban swimming pool, complete with a blue-painted bottom. Only it didn’t look blue in the least, it looked green, because of that disgusting water.

“It’s not really yellow,” Michael asserted.

“Right.”

“Seriously. That’s just the light refracting off the minerals.” He sat down on the edge of the pool and dangled his feet in the steaming saffron broth. He was wearing baggy surfer shorts with washed-out purple swirls that worked nicely with his white hair. Ben was wearing a dark blue Speedo that worked nicely with pretty much everything. She did her best not to stare as he eased himself into the water.

“C’mon, Esther,” said Michael. “You’ll love it once you’re in.”

This was a reference to her own swimsuit, a modest granny model with overlapping ruffles of brown polyester that looked, in fact, much worse than anything Esther Williams ever wore. The guys had found it that morning, all by itself on a rack at the general store, and brought it back to her bedroom with great merriment. Once she hit that water, of course, her suit took on a sickly orange hue, and its ruffles began quivering like the diaphanous folds of a jellyfish.

“Eat shit,” she said, seeing the grin on Michael’s face.

“I have to have a picture of this.”

“Only if you wanna lose the camera.”

“At least there aren’t that many witnesses,” said Ben.

There were half a dozen other people steeping solemnly at the other side of the pool. They seemed to be Eastern Europeans, communally bathing the way they would in their homeland. Mary Ann had already overheard two of the women, both of them large and fish-belly white, chattering away in the changing room. Their grim, guttural tongue had been as foreign to her as Brazilian waxing obviously was to them.

"This is nice," she told the guys, trying to be a good sport.

"You're looking the wrong way." Ben took her head in his hands and turned her gaze to the right, then upward, above the redwood perimeter fence. Half a mile away was a canyon wall roofed with unrelenting blue and flanked by a meadow so white it was almost blinding. Wisps of steam were wriggling from its surface like frisky phantoms.

"My God," she said.

Ben smiled and, without fanfare, began to massage her shoulders. "This is why there's a Pinyon City. People have been coming here a hundred and fifty years. White people, that is. The natives have been here for eons, of course."

"They would migrate from Tahoe in the winter," Michael added. "It's warmer on this side of the mountains, and the pinyons provided pine nuts for them to eat."

This National Geographic Special was not typical of Michael, so Mary Ann figured he was aping Ben, playing faithful assistant tour guide. She might have ribbed him about it, considering his glee over the swimsuit, but she was too blissed out to bother. Ben was working her flesh like a wizard, seemingly unafraid of her aging body, somehow making her at one with the earth in a pool of pee-colored water.

Then self-consciousness took over. Those gloomy Borat people across the way were deadpan as ever, but it wasn't hard to imagine what they were thinking. Who were these weird Americans anyway? This silver-haired old couple traveling with their grown son? Why was the son touching his mother's body with such intimacy? And why was her husband watching them? And what was up with that swimsuit, anyway?

"That was heaven," she said, straightening her neck, discreetly signaling an end to the massage. "Thank you so much, Ben."

"You want me to stop?"

"Let him do it," Michael told her. "He enjoys it."

She glanced briefly toward the other bathers, prompting Michael to roll his eyes skyward with an old familiar impatience. *Get over it*, he was telling her, as he so often had when they were young. *Why do you care what anyone thinks, when you could be dead or dying in six months? Nobody's watching but you.*

"Okay. Fine. Thank you. Have at it."

So Ben dug into her neck while Michael leaned on his elbows at the edge of the pool, reminding her very much of a self-satisfied old walrus.

"You're lucky we didn't take you to Harbin," he said.

"What's Harbin?"

"Another hot springs." Ben was moving on to her shoulders now. "North of the city. Clothing optional."

"No thanks."

"She's a priss," said Michael.

"I'm not a priss. I've been to clothing-optional places."

"Yeah. The ladies' spa at Canyon Ranch."

She shot him a withering look. "No . . . smart-ass . . . I went to Lands End with you and Brian once." She flashed briefly on her now-nomadic first husband, wondering, as she sometimes did, where on this continent his beloved Winnebago had landed.

"You went," said Michael, "but you didn't get naked."

"Yes, I did."

"Trust me. I would've remembered."

What was *that* supposed to mean? "I just don't think," she added as pleasantly as possible, "that people my age should be inflicting their naked selves on the landscape. It's not generally appreciated. It's the same reason I don't litter."

Ben chuckled but didn't comment.

"Lots of people at Harbin are older than us," Michael said.

"Oh, well . . . yum! Why didn't you tell me? Can't wait."

Michael chortled. "Hopeless."

"It's all good," Ben offered noncommittally, ending the discussion as he finished off her shoulders with an amiable whack. "Wanna see our property now? It's on the way back to town. I'd like to try to get to the slopes by noon."

She wondered if she and Michael were starting to get on Ben's nerves.

Their land was only a mile or two down the road, but, just before they reached the turn-off, the guys decided they shouldn't go there without the dog.

"Why?" she asked. "Are there wild animals or something?"

Michael chortled. "Lotta help the doodle would be. It's the critters that eat the dogs around here. We just take him with us for ceremonial purposes. It feels more like home every time he pees on the property. For that matter, every time we do."

"You don't plan on *living* here, do you?"

"Just for a few weeks at a time," said Ben, looking over the seat at her. "A month or two at the most, maybe. It'll be our getaway."

"It's already your getaway. That's the wonderful part." She knew they were nowhere near being able to afford to build something.

The dog went berserk when he saw them again, though they'd been gone only for a couple of hours. They loaded him into the car and headed back to the turn-off. The road, which had recently been plowed, ascended in a leisurely switchback fashion that didn't bother Mary Ann in the slightest until Michael ordered her not to look back.

"Oh, fuck," she said. "Not another cliff."

"No. I just wanna save it until we get there."

What he was saving she finally saw after trudging up a roadside bank to the promontory where their land lay. There was nothing precipitous here to work her nerves, just the gentle falling away of the pines to the long, narrow valley that contained Pinyon City. She couldn't see the town, though, or even a single house. There was a range of saw-toothed mountains in the distance, but no evidence of the highway that had brought them here. The hum she had mistaken for traffic had turned out to be wind in the trees.

"The living room will go here," Michael told her, pointing to a flagged stake in the snow. "The big window will face that way, so we can look directly at Pinyon Peak."

She asked, perhaps indelicately, how they planned to get up here from the road, and what they would do about water and sewage.

"We'll have to dig a well," said Ben. "And put in a septic tank and a driveway. It's no biggie."

It seemed like a huge biggie to her, but she didn't say so. Michael now had his arm around Ben, who'd just thrown a pinecone for Roman, and the two of them were watching the dog bound through the snow like a four-legged Muppet. She had the sense that it wouldn't matter to either of them if they were never able to build here. This was just the canvas on which they could paint their modest dreams, and, as such, it could always be the beginning of something, not the imperfect, inevitable end.

Once Ben had left for the slopes at Kirkwood, Mary Ann and Michael camped out on opposing sofas in the living room. Michael had told her that he was "jonesing" for hot chocolate, so he'd already made a run to the general store for the necessary ingredients, including a bag of mini-marshmallows so ancient and crusty they might have been geological specimens.

"They're okay," he said, after sipping from his mug. "They soften up a lot once they get hot."

She half-expected him to make a bawdy joke about that, but, for once, he didn't strain for a double entendre. He did worse; he asked her about Bob.

"Do we have to talk about him?"

He shrugged. "Just wondering if you've heard anything."

"He left a message on my cell."

"And?"

"I deleted it."

"Well, fine, but—"

"I'm divorcing him, Mouse. I have nothing to talk to him about."

"Then . . . how will he know you want one?"

Why was he doing this? Couldn't he see that she might not want to talk to Bob about *anything*—especially the smoking wreckage of the marriage—when she was on the verge of having her womanhood extracted? She wouldn't have put it that way to Mouse, of course, since she didn't want to be smothered with platitudes about femininity not being an organ but something in the heart and the mind, and blah, blah, blah . . .

"He'll find out soon enough," she told him. "I texted Robbie."

Michael's forehead furrowed in bald-faced disapproval. "You really think he should hear that from his son?"

“Why not?”

“It’s not fair to Robbie, for one thing. He shouldn’t have to deal with that. He’s just barely got his toes into college.”

“You don’t know what’s fair to Robbie. You’ve never even met him. He and I are very close. We talk about a lot of things.”

“Did you talk to him about the tennis pro?”

“What tennis pro?”

“At the country club. Last year.”

“He was a scuba diver, Mouse. I was getting certified.”

“You certainly were.” If he’d had a big cigar in his hand, he would have waggled it at her, Groucho-style. “So, did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Tell your stepson about the redheaded scuba diver. With the crooked dick.”

Mary Ann sighed. Interesting, the details Michael chose to remember. “I love Robbie too much to tell him about something like that.”

“But not enough to keep quiet about his father screwing your life coach.”

“It’s not the same thing, Mouse. It’s entirely different.”

“How?”

“Why are you picking on me?”

“I’m not. I just wanna know how it’s different.”

“Okay, then, think about it for a while . . . these were my two closest confidantes. Well, *she* was, anyway. I told her *everything*, Mouse.”

Michael’s mouth slowly went slack. “You told her about Crooked Dick.”

It wasn’t a question, exactly, so she didn’t reply.

“Tell me you didn’t tell her about Crooked Dick.”

“Stop calling him that. Of course I told her. That’s what you do with a life coach.”

“No. That’s what you do with a shrink. A life coach teaches you how to keep a gratitude journal and sleep with potpourri under your pillow.”

She almost smiled, but repressed it. “This *hurts*, Mouse. You don’t seem to be getting that at all. I told Calliope the most intimate details of my . . . issues with Bob, and she just took them and ran with them. She used them to lure him.”

“What sort of issues?”

“Oh, no. Not on cocoa.”

“You’ll tell Calliope but you won’t tell me?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, thanks a whole heap. That’s nice to know.”

“It’s not that big a deal. You’re making too much of it.” She leaned forward and set her mug on the coffee table in slow motion, buying time so she could compose her thoughts. “I just got tired of doing certain things, that’s all.”

“Like . . . ?”

“Like blowing his wrinkly old cock.”

Michael’s expression betrayed nothing, so she went on:

“Calliope agreed with me, too. That’s what pisses me off. She’d just gotten a divorce and we had a big laugh over it. It was a real bonding moment for us.”

Michael was frowning now. “Cocks don’t wrinkle, for the record. They’re pretty much the only thing that doesn’t, thank God. If you mean plain ol’ bed death—”

“No, Mouse. I didn’t want it in my mouth anymore. It’s no more complicated than that. It was okay for a while, but I got tired of it. I wanted to sit by the fire and go on trips with my husband and look at sunsets. I didn’t want Cirque du Fellatio!”

“And you told Calliope this?”

“Lots of women are like this, Mouse, especially when they get to my age. You don’t know. Viagra is *not* our friend.” She curled her feet under her butt, turning defensive in the face of this interrogation. “Yes, I told Calliope.”

“Shit.”

“I *know*. I should’ve guessed she’d do anything for money.”

Michael nodded. Mary Ann thought he was finally grasping the heinousness of what had happened, but, typically, he had drifted in a different direction entirely.

“You know,” he said, leaning back, as if sweetly ruminating on the shape of a cloud. “I’ve never heard a man complain about having to suck dick . . . a *gay* man, I mean. I’ve heard women complain about it a fair

amount, but never men. Men don't say: 'Damn, do I have to do *that* again?' It just doesn't happen."

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. "Am I on trial here, Mouse? Are you telling me this is *my* fault?"

"No . . . I'm just sayin'."

"Well, stop sayin'."

"It was an observation, Mary Ann. Not a criticism."

"Why are you defending him?"

"Who? Bob? I don't think I'd even *like* him. All I know about him is what I hear from you."

"And stop making it sound like I'm off sex."

"Isn't that what you just said?"

"No! Every now and then is fine."

" 'I have always preferred an occasional orgy to a nightly routine.'"

"What?"

"Aunt Augusta said that. In *Travels with My Aunt*."

She didn't have the energy to ask him what the hell he was talking about. "Whatever."

"I'm *agreeing* with you, Mary Ann. I think it's a lot better if it's an event. Ben and I plan our week around it sometimes. We make a date for Sunday morning. Or whenever, depending on our schedules. If Bob was getting tedious about it—"

"God, you guys are all the same."

Michael raised an eyebrow. "*We* guys?"

"Men." He'd obviously thought she meant gay men and was already set to pounce on her homophobia. "*All* men. Sex is all you ever think about."

"Not always. But it's a good thing." He smiled. "As Martha says."

"Aren't you just getting *tired* of it? How can you even do it anymore on a regular basis? You're the same age I am."

He shrugged. "I have help."

"Viagra, you mean."

He shook his head. "That stuff 's not good for your heart. And it hasn't been working that great lately, to tell you the truth."

"Then what?"

He took a sip of his cocoa. "Sure you wanna hear this?"

"No, but tell me anyway."

He set the mug down again. "I have a shot."

It didn't register right away. "A shot of what?"

"A *shot* shot." He mimed using a syringe—and aimed it in the direction of his crotch. "My doctor prescribed it."

She was sure he was kidding. "Right."

"Well . . . you asked."

"*You give yourself a shot in your penis?*" She winced as if she had one of her own and was already feeling the pinch of the syringe.

"Oh, God, no," said Michael. "I could *never* give myself a shot. Ben does it."

She had a concrete image to work with now, and she wished like hell that she didn't. "And he doesn't mind?" she asked incredulously.

"*Mind?* It turns me into a dildo for two hours. Why should he mind?"

"Mouse!"

"Sorry. You asked . . . I told."

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Oh, no . . . Ben does yoga, you know. He's amazingly—"

"The needle, Mouse! Does the needle hurt?"

He shook his head. "It's just a little prick."

This whole exchange could have been a setup for that stupid joke, but she knew that it hadn't been. She did her best not to register her instant revulsion, moving away from the specifics as quickly as possible "Isn't that a little . . . unromantic?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? It's not, though. It's the most romantic sex I've ever had. I mean, most of that has to do with Ben, but . . . the shot adds a whole other dimension. It leaves room for tenderness. It gives you that . . . leisure. You're thinking about the other person, not your dick . . . well, not *your* dick—"

"Shut up," she said in the friendliest way possible. It was hard enough to picture Ben and Michael, but now, perversely, she was wondering if Bob and Calliope had heard about this stuff, and if it was figuring prominently in their Italian idyll.

"Am I oversharing?" he asked.

"When aren't you?"

"Well . . . when *you're* talking, for one thing."

She gave him a withering look that even the dog seemed to notice.

“On the *phone*,” Michael hastened to add, apparently thinking he was making things better. “It’s much better being face-to-face. You should come out more often.”

That last remark, delivered with a crooked smile, was tinged with both tenderness and resentment. He seemed to be asking: *Why does it take a calamity to get you here?* His neediness came as a complete surprise to her, but it made her feel, well, needed.

“Do you wanna take Roman for a walk?” she asked.

They followed the river road out of town. They walked down the centerline, in fact, since traffic was nonexistent, and it was difficult to navigate the mounds of plowed snow on the shoulders. The landscape was different here, more desert than forest, really. The taller pines had vanished in a matter of minutes, leaving only the squatty pinyons on the hills and the silvery skeletons of aspens along the riverbank.

“I’d be more than happy to go with you,” Michael said out of nowhere.

It took her a while to realize that he was talking about her surgery.

“You haven’t said anything,” he added, “but the offer is there.”

“Thanks, Mouse. That’s really sweet, but . . . I think DeDe has pretty much got me covered. It’s sort of a girl thing, anyway, you know.”

He gave her a heavy-lidded scowl.

“It’s just an overnigher, Mouse. I’d rather have you guys waiting for me when I get out.”

“As you wish, madam. Whatever gender role you require.”

She socked him on his shoulder with a gloved hand. It would have been nice to have taken his arm and simply strolled for a while through this bleakly beautiful place, but the dog was trotting between them on his leash, keeping apace. She’d noticed that Roman wasn’t good at heeling for one person, but he had to be in the middle if two were traveling as one. He had his own insecurities, this dog, and wasn’t letting go of them.

After a long silence, she asked: “Have you seen Anna lately?”

The name didn’t come naturally to her. First-name familiarity seemed almost disrespectful to the kind, stately presence Mary Ann had known as Mrs. Madrigal. But Michael had apparently been calling their former landlady “Anna” ever since he’d reached middle age, so Mary Ann had taught herself to follow his custom.

“We had her over for dinner last month,” Michael replied. “I see her a fair amount, of course, when I have to pick up Jake . . . or drop something off.”

She had met Michael’s assistant only once, when she had flown back to San Francisco in Bob’s jet after Mrs. Madrigal had suffered her stroke. He had struck Mary Ann as extremely shy but conscientious. She hadn’t had a clue that Jake was transgendered until Michael told her after her return to Connecticut.

“It’s wonderful that she has him, isn’t it?”

“And vice versa,” said Michael.

A big black bird—a raven, she supposed, or maybe a crow—flew from the riverbank and landed just ahead of them on a yellow-and-black highway sign reading ICY CONDITIONS AHEAD. The bird cackled for a moment, as if punctuating the message, then flew away again, a harbinger out of Poe lost in the twenty-first century.

It all goes so fast, she thought. We dole out our lives in dinner parties and plane flights, and it’s over before we know it. We lose everyone we love, if they don’t lose us first, and every single thing we do is intended to distract us from that reality.

“Will you take me to see her?” she asked.

Michael had lost track of the conversation. “Sorry . . . what?”

“Will you take me to see Anna?”

“Of course.” He seemed almost relieved. “As soon as we get back, if you like.”

“Let’s wait until after the surgery,” she said. “It’ll be better then.”

She was always putting things off, she realized, always assuming she’d have at least one more chance. Sooner or later, she would probably have to pay for that.

Sacred Garments

Jake was wearing one of Michael's old coveralls that day. They were too tight around the waist for Michael, but they were still in good shape, so Michael had been happy to pass them along—tickled about it, in fact. Jake liked the retro eighties lettering of the name on the back—PLANT PARENTHOOD—and liked explaining its history, though the nursery hadn't been Michael's for years, and had since been renamed.

There had been a break in the rain, so Jake was on a ladder at a client's house in Presidio Heights, cleaning leaves out of the fancy bronze gutters before the next downpour arrived. When his phone vibrated, he looked to see who it was—then took the call.

"Dude."

Jonah didn't say anything right away. Jake hadn't talked to him since their soccer-and-cuddling session, so he wasn't sure whether to expect regret or righteousness or what. In his mind, though, he was already watching TV with Jonah again (Manchester United, this time) and playing by the same uncomplicated rules of love.

"I need your help," Jonah said at last.

"What's goin' on, man?"

"I've been lustful again."

"Okay." Jake's face was aflame with unmanly blushes. *Nice, dillweed. Good thing you're just on the phone.*

"Where are you?" asked Jonah.

"At work."

"You get lunch off? Can we meet at your grandma's place?"

"She's not my grandma, dude. And she's got company." The upstairs neighbors, Selina and Marguerite, were probably hanging out with Anna

now, since they'd all gone to the four-story rainforest that morning and had planned on coming home for lunch. "You've gotta give me some warning," Jake said with a rapidly sinking heart.

"You could come here," Jonah suggested.

"Where are you?"

"At the condo."

"What condo?"

"The one they rented for the elders."

"Dude."

"It's cool. I'm by myself. The others have gone back to Salt Lake."

That's right. They won. Their job is done.

"Gimme the address," said Jake.

"You don't mind?"

"Nah. I can get off. I'm my own boss." That was *almost* true, since Michael was still in the mountains and lunch hour was always Jake's to call.

"Praise God," said Jonah.

"Whatever," said Jake, already feeling like a fool.

The condo was on the fourth floor of a modern building near the Moscone Center. Jake had been expecting the chaos of a dorm room, but there was very little evidence that four other young guys had recently been camping out there. It wasn't until they passed an empty room on their way to Jonah's room that he spotted, stacked against a wall, signs of recent activity. That's exactly what they were—signs—printed political posters that bore messages like YES ON 8 and MARRIAGE = ONE MAN + ONE WOMAN. There were also some obviously homemade efforts: cardboard crosses nailed to wooden stakes with Bible verses rendered in Magic Marker.

Jonah closed the door as they passed.

So that's what the left-handed scissors were for.

"We don't have to do it in the bedroom," Jonah told him. "I just thought it might be easier on the bed."

"Whatever," said Jake.

In the bedroom, Jonah waited solemnly, wordlessly, for Jake to assume the position before crawling into his arms. There wasn't a TV in the room this time, so they wouldn't have soccer to talk about. Jonah was wearing a

starched white shirt and creased trousers, which made Jake self-conscious as soon as the kid had settled against his chest.

“Sorry about the grody coveralls.”

“That’s okay.”

“I can take ’em off. I’ve got clean clothes underneath.”

“No . . . it’s more masculine this way.”

“Okay.”

“I need that energy, you know.”

Jake began to rock him, as the so-called therapy demanded, instinctively adopting a gruff tone. “I know, son. I know.” The “son” part might have been overdoing it, but Jake had seen enough daddy porn to know how easily he could pull off the slow-talking country contractor thing. He was from Tulsa, after all. If Jonah needed the sexless affection of a man’s man to escape the fires of damnation, Jake was willing to oblige.

“What was it this time?”

“The same,” Jonah replied dolefully.

“The same guy?”

“The same *thing*. Lust.”

Jake could feel the heat of the kid’s breath on his chest. It felt pleasurable all by itself, so he found himself grateful that the doctor who had done his top surgery had done such a good job of keeping his sensitivity intact.

“Where were you?” asked Jake.

“A bus shelter out on Market Street.”

“What happened?”

“There were two guys. One was black, and one was white. And they were both naked and had their arms around each other.”

“Dude . . . I mean, son . . . in the bus shelter?”

“Behind the glass.”

“You saw them through the glass, you mean?”

“On a poster, dude. It was like . . . an ad for some AIDS thing. Ginormous. As tall as me.”

“Okay.”

“I’m like standing next to them. And they’re both smiling like everything is cool. It was the sin and the punishment, all in the same picture, and they’re smiling about it.”

“And you were turned on?”

“Yeah.”

Jonah’s despair hung heavy in the air, and Jake didn’t know what to say, so he just kept rocking for a while. “Am I doing okay, son?”

“Yeah. This is good.”

“Cool.”

“I just have to talk it out. Put it all out there, so I can banish it. That’s what my therapist says.”

Jake stroked the kid’s hair a few times. Jonah snuggled closer, like a big yellow cat getting comfortable. “I think Heavenly Father sent me here to test me.”

“And distribute flyers,” said Jake.

The crack carved out another silence between them. “You know, dude,” Jonah said. “I don’t judge you for your lifestyle. That’s your choice. I just don’t choose that myself.”

“Gotcha.”

“Then who is she, if she’s not your grandma?”

The sudden change of subject threw Jake. “Oh . . . she’s just a friend. She’s my boss’s . . . my business partner’s old landlady. I keep an eye on her and cook and stuff, help out with things.”

“She was nice to me,” said Jonah.

“That’s how she is.”

“Are you worried about losing her?”

No one had ever asked Jake that question. He’d heard Shawna and Michael talk about Anna’s mortality on several occasions, once even in front of Anna, but he’d never been asked how he personally would feel about her passing.

“I think about it,” he said.

“She’s way old, I guess.”

Jake nodded. “And she seems like she’s kinda ready.”

“Like . . . how?”

“I dunno. She fusses over her clothes in the morning like it’s the last thing she’s ever gonna wear. Scarves and little hats and shit like that. Then she goes out and just sits there for hours, all dressed up, like she’s just waiting for a bus or something.”

“Sits where?”

“You know what a gazebo is?”

“My sister got married in one. At the Radisson in Phoenix.”

“Right . . . I built one of those for Anna out back, and that’s where she hangs out. Sometimes it looks like she’s expecting a mother ship to arrive.”

“Or the Lord.”

Jake wasn’t going to argue about who or what Anna might be expecting, but the constant intrusion of the divine made him begin to wonder about something.

“So . . . are you wearing your sacred underwear now?”

Silence, and then: “They’re called temple garments, dude.”

“Whatever.”

“People mock ’em, but it’s no different from any other religious garb. Like nuns with the habits . . . or Jewish people with those little beanie things.”

“C’mon, dude, it’s underwear. Underwear is funny.”

Jonah held his ground. “Not to us. We wear them to remind ourselves of the covenants we made in the temple. And to gird against temptation. They give them to us at the Endowment Ceremony.”

They have an underwear endowment ceremony. “So now that you’re a man, Jake, here is the endowment for your underwear . . . your sacred packer.”

He smiled to himself and continued to rock Jonah. “How much of you does it, like, cover up?”

“We’re not supposed to talk about the garments.”

“Dude, I can Google it.”

Jonah sighed. He’d obviously been asked this one too many times. “The pants go down to the top of my knees. The top is like a regular T-shirt, only longer. You’re not supposed to see skin if you put your hands over your head.”

“Can I just . . . feel?” Jake slipped a finger between two of the buttons on Jonah’s shirtfront.

“Whoa . . . dude!”

Jonah’s squirming overreaction annoyed Jake. “This is supposed to be a nonsexual thing, right? Just man-to-man affection with our clothes on.”

“Yes.”

“So why are you acting like it’s something else? I’m down with the program, Jonah. You’re the one who’s actin’ like a teenage girl.”

“I just don’t—”

“If I’m gonna cure you from being a homo, the least you can do is let me touch your magical garments.”

Jonah smiled, rolling his eyes in a way that struck Jake as totally gay. “They’re not magical,” he said, undoing a single button on his shirtfront.

“Obviously.” Jake rubbed the cotton fabric briefly, chastely, before buttoning up Jonah’s shirt again. “When you headin’ back to Snowflake?”

“Day after tomorrow. Another elder is takin’ the bus in from Bakersfield, and we’re flying out together.”

“He was . . . what? . . . going door to door?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess it’s easier in Bakersfield. Than here, I mean.”

“Word,” said Jonah. “Prop 8 passed in Bakersfield.”

“Sorry we’ve been so hard on you.” Jake’s lip curled just enough for Jonah to catch his meaning. “Listen, Jonah, you’re gonna hafta take cold showers from now on.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just . . . I won’t be available for therapy tomorrow. I’ve got a big gardening job, and I won’t be home until late.”

“Oh.”

“So don’t plan on any emergency boners.”

The kid sighed. “I never plan on it, dude.”

“Funny how that works.” Jake rocked him for a while. “Almost like it’s natural, huh? Like it’s who you are, and there’s nothing you can do about it. And it’s not just about your dick, either. It’s about who you are inside, and what you need to be happy.”

Twisting his head to look at Jake, Jonah frowned.

“You know what I think?” He coaxed the kid’s head back into his hands. “I think you’re gonna go back to Snowflake and have a nice reunion with Becky, and the next day you’re gonna go to your therapist and climb on his lap, and tell him all about me.”

Jonah wrenched himself free from Jake’s embrace, rising to his knees on the bed.

His face was contorted and completely aflame, like he was some other person entirely. Jake braced himself for the jolt of a fist across his jaw.

“You fucker,” Jonah murmured, before leaning down to kiss Jake on the mouth.

They stayed that way for a while, Jonah’s soft lips nestling in Jake’s beard while his tongue foraged for something he seemed to have wanted for a long time. Jake gave it to him, too—not because he required anything more, but because he wouldn’t settle for anything less. It was a turning point for both of them, and it deserved recognition.

Afterward, as Jonah lay in his arms, Jake asked: “Was that your first kiss with a guy?”

“Oh, yeah.”

He tousled the kid’s hair. “It’s been an honor, then.”

Beauty Sleep

Otto, still panting from the bike ride through the Mission, set the box on Shawna's kitchen table. He had ended up taking his two-wheeler, though he'd argued compellingly for the unicycle, claiming it would lend an air of whimsy to the proceedings and make the whole thing more of a celebration. The idea had actually appealed to her, for a moment or two, until she made herself picture a unicycle arriving at a crematorium, or—worse yet—leaving. It might have seemed a tad indecorous.

Otto used both his hands to rake his unruly hair. "Did you know they call them cremains?" he said, sitting down at the table. "Whatever happened to 'ashes'? 'Ashes' is poetic. 'Cremains' sounds like some sorta powdered shit you put in your coffee."

Shawna smiled at him. "You want some?"

"Sure."

She rose and poured him a cup of coffee, bringing it back to the table. "I didn't do any better at the coroner's office. I had to fill out something called a Homeless Death Form. I'm not sure which word is less depressing: Homeless, Death, or Form."

"That's cold, all right."

"They just wanted it filled out. It didn't seem to matter much if it was the truth. They told me to write 'unknown' when I didn't know the answer, and I must've written it a dozen times. It felt like I was erasing her life."

Otto held the coffee cup under his nose and sniffed it. This was one of his funny rituals around food, something he called Active Appreciation. "Any luck with that?" he asked, meaning Alexandra's lunch box, which was next to her ashes on the table.

Shawna shook her head. “Too bad a picture isn’t *really* worth a thousand words.” She’d hoped to find something in the photos that might lead her to one of Alexandra’s survivors, if such a person existed. There had been those parents, of course, the ones who’d rented their child to strangers, and that creepy Mr. Williams, who may or may not have been a client, but Shawna had no illusions about bringing them to justice thirty years after the fact. All she was hoping was that someone, at some point in Alexandra’s short, miserable life, had loved her enough to wonder what had happened to her.

“How many pictures are there?” asked Otto.

“Not many. The young one at Barbary Lane and maybe a dozen others that were obviously taken before she started using. The other people in the pictures seem friendly enough. Coworkers, maybe. Or friends, even. But who the fuck *are* they?”

Otto opened the lunch box and riffled through the photos.

“Damn, she was fine.”

“Tell me about it.”

He held up one of the photos. “What about this fabric store?”

“I called them already. Nobody’s heard of her. It was at least fifteen years ago.”

“You said she worked at a Foot Locker, too. West Portal, right?”

“Same thing. Those places have a huge turnover.”

“And you Googled Lemke.”

“Of course. They’re all over the place, believe it or not. There are even some other Alexandra Lemkes. The Web tells you *too* much sometimes.”

Otto took the lunch box and dumped the contents on the table. Amid the photos was a pathetic tangle of costume jewelry and condom wrappers, glinting with sooty shards of aluminum foil that Alexandra must have used for smoking crack. Otto seemed fascinated by the inside of the lunch box itself, where Obi-Wan Kenobi was gazing up from the bottom with melancholy wisdom. He began to pick at the corner of the image.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s cardboard. I think it comes out.” He fiddled with it until the bottom pulled away completely, revealing the raw tin innards of the lunchbox. “*Et voilà!* Princess Leia’s secret hiding place.”

There was a letter there, still in its envelope, though it had already been opened. It was stuck to the tin, so Otto pried it away and handed it to Shawna. “Would you like to do the honors?”

There was a major revelation even before she removed the letter. The envelope was addressed to Alexandra Lemke at 437 Tandy Street, San Francisco, California.

“She had an address! She lived somewhere!”

“What’s the postmark say? What year?”

She squinted at the faded numbers. “1995. So she was . . . what? . . . in her late twenties?”

Otto was enjoying her excitement. “Open it.”

Her hands were actually shaking as she read aloud to him.

Dear Lexy,

Only 2 or 3 more days in Coos Bay and then I’m coming home to you. My aunt is very sick and they say she doesn’t have much longer. Please don’t do any more of the bad stuff. You know what I mean. I know its hard when I’m not their, but I will help you get better. I know you had it bad when you were little, but I truely believe that our love will make it better. Your my angel and you always will be. You are safe now. I will always be grateful to God that you married me—and that I went to buy those shoes. Ha ha.

See you soon!

Love always,

C

Shawna set the letter down and gaped at Otto. “Jesus. She was married.”

“Yep.”

“And it sounds like she was already using.” She pondered that for a moment. “Why do you think she kept this so long? Because he never came home again?”

“Why would you say that?”

Good question, Shawna. Why are you projecting your own half-assed desertion issues onto a dead homeless woman?

“What . . . then?” she asked. “You think she was too fucked-up to stick around? That she left *him*?”

“Maybe. Or they could’ve had a few more years together before she hit the skids. Who knows? It’s a nice letter. She probably saved it for sentimental reasons.”

“She must’ve met him at the Shoe Locker.”

“Yeah.” Otto tilted his chair back and rocked on it, his long, denimed legs extended, as if he were trying out a new prop for his act.

“Ever heard of Tandy Street?” she asked.

“It’s behind the Mint, I think. Up there on the hill.”

“Wanna go for a ride?”

Otto winced. “Aw . . . jeez.”

“What?”

“I thought we were gonna take her to Stow Lake.”

“We can do that later,” she told him. “If that’s what we wanna do.”

“This woman is dead, Shawna. It’s over. Do you really wanna make a pilgrimage to some place she lived thirteen years ago?”

“What if her husband still lives there? That’s possible, isn’t it?”

“Pretty remote, I’d say.”

“Yeah, but if he *is* still there, wouldn’t he like to know what happened to her?”

“Right. That she ended up turning tricks in Cocksuck Alley.”

“I would like to know,” she said. “If it were you, for instance. If you ended up, say, disappearing into the sordid underbelly of Pier 39.”

He smiled at her like a sleepy forest cat. He was used to her jokes about that venue. “We have to leave the ashes in the car. We can’t just show up with his wife in a box.”

“Please. Gimme some credit.”

“And what do we do if the current Mrs. Lemke answers the door?”

That threw her for a moment. “Then . . . we’ll deal.”

“*You’ll* deal.”

“Fine. Whatever.” It hadn’t occurred to her, actually, that Lemke might have been Alexandra’s married name. This opened a whole new range of possibilities.

“Are you down with this?” she asked. “I can do it on my own.”

Otto brought his chair down with a thud, clapping his hand around the box of ashes.

“Why don’t we ask *her*?” He held the box out as if he were Hamlet addressing the skull of Yorick. “Alexandra, are you down with this? Do you wanna go to Tandy Street?”

“Fuck no,” he said, assuming a high-pitched voice that was nothing at all like Alexandra’s gravelly growl. “Tell that pesky cunt to leave me the fuck alone. I’m over this shit. I need my beauty sleep.”

Shawna laughed. “Stick with the monkey, kid.”

“And tell me, Alexandra, do you think Shawna will go to Tandy Street anyway, no matter *what* we think?”

“Fuckin’-A! She needs an end to her motherfuckin’ story.”

“Very funny.”

“And she’ll probably wanna scatter my cremains all over some stranger’s motherfuckin’ yard.”

His intuition amazed her sometimes.

Personal Effects

There was a rosy dawn on the day of Mary Ann's hysterectomy, so she took that as a good omen. DeDe was arriving at six a.m. to drive her to St. Sebastian's Hospital; the surgery would be at eight. She'd asked Ben and Michael—ordered them, in fact—not to get up early on her account and to go about their usual workdays. She didn't want a fuss made unless (or until) she actually needed one. It had been a stupid instruction, driven largely by superstition, so she was glad to see the guys had ignored it. She was locking up the garden house when she found the floral-patterned gift bag on the doorstep.

Inside, bundled with a curly pink ribbon, was a T-shirt that read PINYON CITY: THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. She'd seen these shirts at the general store, so Ben must have bought it when he came back from snowboarding at Kirkwood. Unless, of course, Michael had grabbed it on a whim when he went to get those Neolithic marshmallows for their hot chocolate. Either way, the subtext of the gift made her smile. The guys weren't taking no for an answer. They were marking this passage in her life—her *womb voyage*, as Dr. Ginny had once called it—whether she liked it or not.

She opened the door again, and left the T-shirt on the bed, since she'd have no use for it at the hospital. It was nice to think of it waiting there upon her return. They really were her angels, those two. She'd been dead right about coming here. Darien, with its treacherous crosscurrents of pity and gossip, would have been intolerable.

Locking up again, she crossed the garden with her overnight bag and stood on the sidewalk in the clarifying light, waiting for DeDe to whisk her away to whatever came next. She felt almost buoyant, hanging in the

balance like this, since she'd lost the weight of her usual distractions; everything she needed for this journey had to come from inside of her now. It was that simple. She wasn't even bringing her laptop to the hospital, and, even more tellingly, hadn't laid eyes on her Facebook page since they got home from Pinyon City. She was her own woman now, for better or worse.

DeDe's well-bred little Audi was new, and Mary Ann found comfort in the virginal smell of it. *If we could just keep driving*, she thought, concocting her own pushing-sixty version of *Thelma and Louise*. Let's just stay here forever in this clean, well-cushioned place, listening to John Mayer on the Blaupunkt, while we gab about our favorite hill towns in Italy and all the silly things we've ordered online. DeDe had been fastidiously avoiding the topic of the hour, and Mary Ann had so appreciated that.

"Do you see much of Shawna in New York?"

"Once. Once I saw her."

"Oops."

"It's not bad. It's just . . . nothing. I don't blame her. I'd feel the same way myself. I don't have any claim on her." She gazed out the window, marveling at the girth of the passing street trees; it wasn't the buildings here that told her how long she'd been away but the forests that had grown up around them. "It's funny," she added, "her dad doesn't hold a grudge anymore. He sees how wrong we were for each other. But to her I'm still the bad guy. You can't break a five-year-old's heart and not expect to pay for it sooner or later."

"C'mon now."

"It's true, though. Actions have consequences. *In*actions have them. We set things in motion by what we *don't* do. I'm not saying I would have done things any different. Brian was born to raise children, and I wasn't. Anyway, she was always Daddy's little girl. She ended up in the right place."

"Well, now that you're on the same coast . . ."

"No, she's back again. And I'm not sure *what* coast *I'm* on."

DeDe glanced at her. "She's back *here*, you mean?"

"Yeah. Michael keeps up with her. She lives in the Mission somewhere."

DeDe was silent for a moment, so John Mayer's lyrics filled the gap: *No, it won't all go the way it should, but I know the heart of life is good.*

"I love that song," said Mary Ann.

"Me too."

"I made it my ringtone, actually." She smiled at her taciturn old friend. "That's hopelessly unhip of me, right?"

"Who cares?"

"I'm sure it is. It's gotta be. I never like anything hip. I used to like John Denver, for heaven's sake."

DeDe chuckled. "D'or gave me shit about that last month. We were driving out to Skylonda to get her *dosha* balanced, and I was singing along to 'Country Roads.'"

"To get her *what* balanced?"

"Her *dosha*?"

"What on earth is that?"

"Who knows? I get my nails done while she's doing it."

Mary Ann laughed, and it felt really good.

"She loves Shawna's blog, by the way. She's been writing about some homeless woman, and D'or can't get enough of it."

"Well . . . D'or is hip. Always has been."

DeDe caught her drift and smirked. "Too much for ya, huh?"

"I don't read it. Well, once. Once I read it."

DeDe chuckled. "Not my cup of tea either, I have to admit."

This was what Mary Ann loved about her. DeDe never claimed to be hip, and really didn't care who knew it. "I love that we can talk like this," she said. "We have such a great bond after all these years."

DeDe gave her a sly smile. "We know where the bodies are buried."

When they arrived at St. Sebastian's, she was disconcerted by the number of times she was asked the purpose of her visit to the hospital. She hadn't expected a welcoming committee, but it was bothersome and, yes, faintly demeaning to have to keep repeating herself at a time like this. It was DeDe who explained they were just making sure they didn't remove a uterus from someone who had come there, say, for a heart transplant, though that wasn't especially reassuring. The sense that she was losing her identity in the clanking machinery of this pastel place was only heightened when they

gave her a locker key with a wristband and a plastic bag for her “personal effects.”

“What next?” she whispered. “Delousing and leg irons?”

DeDe chuckled, handing her the final humiliation, her backless hospital gown. “The ladies’ room is over there. I’ll guard the door while you change.” Mary Ann had a quick, amusing image of that: DeDe standing like a lone sentinel with her arms firmly folded across her matronly bosom. Mother Goose in a Chanel suit.

In the women’s room she slipped out of her skirt and blouse and put her cocktail rings and tennis bracelet in the plastic bag. She was glad she’d left her wedding ring back in Darien, since she didn’t have to confront the symbolism of removing it now. She had put on makeup that morning, out of old habit and something to do with pride, but she refrained from checking it in the mirror. She didn’t want to see herself in this moment.

DeDe followed her down the hall to anesthesia. “Don’t worry,” she said drily, “I’ve got your back,” by which she meant she was doing her best to block the public view of Mary Ann’s flagrantly exposed ass. “And, by the way, missy, if that were *my* booty, I’d do all these sick people a favor and let ’em see it.”

Mary Ann laughed. “You’re a shameless liar.” *But such a lovely friend*, she thought, since lately most of her female comforters had been paid professionals. First Calliope—well, that harridan hadn’t been professional, but she had certainly been paid—and now, of course, Dr. Ginny, whose strong, calm presence had been wonderful, but all in the line of duty. DeDe, however, was not being reimbursed for her support. Mary Ann had almost forgotten how good it felt to have a woman like that in her life.

The anesthesiologist was a blotchy-faced bald guy with a German accent, who wasted no time smiling as he inserted the needle into her arm. “I think you are nervous,” he said sternly, almost as if he were scolding her. It struck her as odd and inappropriate. She was about to lose a smorgasbord of organs: uterus, cervix, ovaries, even her goddamn appendix; all things considered, she thought she was holding up pretty well.

“No,” she said evenly. “I’m okay.”

He shook his head. “I think you are nervous.”

“Of course she’s nervous,” snapped DeDe. “She has cancer. What the hell do you expect her to be?” This was exactly why DeDe had worn

Chanel, Mary Ann realized, so she could say things like that and not be thrown out of the room.

But it dawned on Mary Ann that what had seemed like callousness on this man's part may have been something else entirely. "I think," she said, casting a quick glance at DeDe, "he's asking that because he needs to determine . . . what he needs to give me in the way of . . . mood elevators."

"Oh," said DeDe, looking instantly humbled. "She's nervous, then. She's really, really nervous."

The anesthesiologist permitted himself a smile. "Is that your opinion, too?"

"Yes," Mary Ann said, grinning back at him. "It is."

Once he had made his final adjustments and they were alone again, DeDe leaned closer to Mary Ann. "That's what you get for bringing a pushy old lesbian."

Mary Ann smiled. "Will you stay until I'm out?"

"You bet. And I'll be here when you wake up. They're putting a bed in your room for me. We can have a slumber party tonight."

"Forty-fives," said Mary Ann.

"What?"

"You know, those little record cases we brought to slumber parties."

"Oh, yeah."

"Tell me you did that in Hillsborough. It wasn't just Cleveland, was it?"

" 'Course not. I had slumber parties all the time. D'or and I still sleep in that room, in fact."

"Sweet." Mary Ann looked at the tube sending sleep into her arm. "Anesthesia is such a beautiful word, isn't it? A-nes-thesia. It's like a little town in Mendocino. 'Let's go up to that wonderful B&B in Anesthesia.'"

"Sounds like a plan."

"No . . . I didn't mean that liberally."

"Literally."

"Right, I didn't mean it . . . what?"

"Nothing, Mary Ann. Sweet dreams."

Resident Darkness

Three or four times a week, usually in the afternoon, Ben would leave his workshop on Norfolk Street to swim laps at the Embarcadero Y. This stolid old brick building (according to Michael, at least) had been a sort of seedy flophouse/orgy palace back in the days before the Village People told the world that it was fun to play at the YMCA. Now—inside, at least—it was a modern health club whose indoor pool and StairMasters had dramatic close-up views of the Bay Bridge. The locker room could be cruisy from time to time, but only in a subtle, subterranean way, since there were plenty of straight guys and kids who went there. The members were wildly diverse, in fact. Some of them looked like CEOs, others like homeless men on a day pass.

The showers were semiprivate. There were dividers between them, but they were open on the end, so you could see the person showering across from you. At the moment, that was a beefy, hook-nosed Mediterranean—Italian or Greek, Ben guessed, and probably in his mid-fifties—with a dense doormat of a chest and a hefty provolone between his legs. He was doing the familiar mating dance of the shower, lathering longer than necessary, making extravagant white slaloms of soap through his fur.

He glanced at Ben enough to make his interest clear, so Ben shortened the ritual with a welcoming smile before heading to his locker. Three minutes later, as Ben was climbing into his jeans, the guy appeared in his boxer shorts, presenting his business card.

“My cell is on the bottom there. If you wanna call.”

“Cool,” said Ben, putting the card in his back pocket.

“Unless you got time now. My place is in South Beach. Walking distance.” The guy smiled at him; his teeth were good, and he seemed

straightforward enough, trustworthy. His hair was dyed—unnecessarily and not very well—but some things could be forgiven, if the other elements were right. And, man, *were* they.

He had planned on going back to the studio to finish an end table for a client in Seattle, but early-afternoon hookups worked well for him, since Michael raised a fuss when Ben's play cut into their evening time. On the other hand, Michael expected full disclosure after the event, and this was not the day for that: they'd be waiting for the results of Mary Ann's surgery, and there would be other things to talk about before dinner. "Sorry," he told the guy. "I'll give you a call, though."

The guy nodded but looked rejected, so Ben showed his sincerity by fishing a business card from his wallet. "That's my cell," he said. "Or you can call me at my studio. I'm usually there during the day."

The guy studied the card. "Master craftsman, huh?"

"I work wood."

"Oh, yeah? Sure hope so." The guy winked and squeezed Ben's arm as if no one had ever made that joke before, then sauntered back to his own locker.

Too bad, thought Ben, as he watched him round the corner out of sight.

Then, as he tugged his T-shirt over his head, someone came up behind him and asked: "How was Pinyon City?" He pulled the T-shirt into place and turned to find a face so jarringly out of context that it took him a while to identify it.

Cliff from the dog park. Cliff of Blossom and Cliff. The old man was shirtless and wearing baggy brown trousers that were shiny-thin with age.

"Oh . . . hey, Cliff . . . it was fun." Ben had mentioned their upcoming trip to Pinyon City on his last visit to the dog park. In fact, he'd probably bored the old man on the subject, since Ben tended to babble around Cliff just to keep the conversation afloat. For someone who seemed to crave company, Cliff wasn't especially gregarious.

"And your friend from the East?"

"Oh . . . Mary Ann? Yeah, she went with us."

"She liked it?"

"Yeah. She loved it. It snowed while we were there."

"That's nice."

"Yeah . . . it was."

Long, awkward silence.

"I didn't realize you were a member here," Ben said, filling the void. "I mean, I've never seen you."

"I come on a day pass sometimes."

"Right."

"I like the pool."

"Yeah, me too. Especially when it's nasty outside."

"Yep. Nice today, though. The weather."

"How's Blossom?"

"She's good."

"That's great. Cool name, by the way. Perfect for a little dog."

The old man nodded, then sighed with unexpected intensity. "The wife named her. After Blossom Dearie. The jazz singer. She was one of our favorites."

The wife, thought Ben. Such a straight-guy thing to say. But Ben liked knowing that this melancholy codger had company at home. Assuming he wasn't a widower.

"Is she . . . still with us?" he asked.

"Think so. Don't know if she's still singing, but—"

"I meant your wife."

"Oh . . . yeah . . . she's alive." Cliff looked flustered. "But she's not . . . with me anymore."

"Sorry to hear that."

"She had problems. I tried to make it better, but . . ." His voice trailed off as his eyes filled with weariness and despair. "I have to get home . . . speaking of Blossom."

"Nice seeing you," said Ben. "Say hi to her for me."

"Will do." Cliff stood there a moment longer, avoiding intimacy by keeping his eyes fixed on the tile floor. "Thanks for being so nice to me."

It was heartbreaking to hear him lay out his loneliness in such a blatant way. "Oh . . . hey . . . it's easy, Cliff. You're good company."

"No, I'm not. You don't have to say that."

Ben would have protested, but the old man turned and walked away.

"Catch you at the dog park," Ben called, trying to end this on an upbeat note.

Cliff lifted his hand in mute reply and just kept walking. It was then that Ben noticed the scar on his back: an ugly puckered line, smoothed somewhat by the passage of years, running all the way from his shoulder blade to his waist.

Surgery? For a tumor or something? It seemed too irregular for that.

A war wound, then? Ben remembered Cliff's story about the mascot dog that had to be shot when he was serving in Vietnam.

Whatever its cause, the scar only deepened the sense that Cliff's gloom was the product of a lifetime of troubles. There were layers to that resident darkness, Ben thought, and no one outside of the old man himself would ever know what they were.

A Grace Period

Tandy Street was a bitch to find. It wasn't on the hill behind the Mint, as Otto had remembered, but closer to the Lower Haight, and its only street sign had been all but obscured by graffiti and antiwar stickers. What's more, the address they were looking for—437—was not displayed on any of the houses. They located 429 and 445, so they had to assume it was the house between them, a Victorian cottage made Spanish in the twenties by a flat stucco facade. The Band-Aid-colored plaster was falling away like so many scabs, exposing the laths beneath. The window's colorless curtains were drawn.

"Alexandra's love nest," Otto said sardonically.

"Well," said Shawna, "it could have been heaven on earth, considering her shitty childhood. Maybe it was nice when she lived here. Maybe there's a garden in back."

"Maybe Jeffrey Dahmer has a workshop in the basement."

It irritated her that Otto was trying to fuck up Alexandra's happy ending—or, at least, her happy middle. Who was Otto to point fingers? His own little alley studio was way depressing, but it could still be incredibly sweet on a rainy evening when they were snuggling after sex. She needed to know that such pleasures had come to Alexandra, however briefly, that somewhere between the child rape and that flesh-eating disease someone had made her feel safe and loved and at home. Shawna was beginning to think she couldn't scatter Alexandra's ashes *anywhere* without some reassurance of that. There would be nothing to celebrate but her death.

"It looks deserted," said Otto.

"Why? Because it's run-down?"

"Well . . . yeah."

“So let’s ring the bell and see.”

“Why not just look through the curtains?”

She rolled her eyes impatiently. “Like that’s any less invasive than ringing the bell?”

“I didn’t say that. I just think it might be advisable, under the circumstances. Wouldn’t you like to see how they live before we see who comes to the door?”

This did make a certain sense, so she looked both ways down the sidewalk to make sure they were alone before sidling over to the window, a featureless rectangle of aged aluminum, speckled with corrosion. She peered through the foot-wide opening in the curtains to what she could see of the living room, then reported back to Otto.

“It’s not the tidiest place, but it’s not Grey Gardens either. It’s kind of homey, actually. They’ve got a Snuggie.”

“A what?”

“You know. Those ridiculous blanket things with sleeves. As seen on TV?” She grinned at him. “That soul-sucking corporate appliance you want no part of?”

He gave it right back to her. “It’s a good thing *you*’ve got one, then, or I never would’ve known what a Snuggie is.”

“I’m gonna ring the bell.”

“Go right ahead.”

“If somebody’s here, we can show them the picture. If not, we can go home and fuck.”

Otto held up crossed fingers, smiling.

She pressed the dark Bakelite nipple of the doorbell. It made no sound at all, so she pressed it again. “Do you think they can hear it inside?”

He shook his head. “It’s dead.”

She rapped on the door, and, almost immediately, a dog began to bark.

“Hey there, little buddy,” Otto crooned, when the apoplectic dog appeared in the window to confront the intruders. It was tiny, though, and its tail was wagging.

“I guess *he*’s the doorbell,” said Shawna.

They waited for someone to show up. No one did.

“C’mon,” said Otto.

“Just a little longer.”

“The neighbors are noticing, Shawna.”

Across the street an old woman with garish red hair was eyeing them as she poured water from a saucepan onto a potted plant on her doorstep.

Shawna strode over to talk to her, with Otto close behind. “We’re looking for the people who live here.”

The woman regarded her dubiously. “Are you here for the environment?”

“No, no.” Shawna grinned. “Not at all. I mean . . . we’re totally *for* the environment, but . . . we’ve just got something we’d like to show them.”

“Them?”

“Well . . . whoever lives there.” Realizing how shady this was sounding, Shawna got specific. “We have some information about someone who used to live there back in the nineties. Alexandra Lemke?” She pulled one of the photos from her shoulder bag (the gorgeous grown-up shot taken at the fabric store) and showed it to the neighbor. “This is probably ten or fifteen years old, but . . . maybe you recognize her?”

The woman said nothing.

“That may have been before you lived here, of course.”

Shawna’s effort at a smile was not returned. “You social workers, then?”

“No. Just . . . private citizens.”

Seeing how badly she was bungling this, Otto stepped forward and tried to establish their credentials. “She was a friend of Alexandra’s. We both were.”

“Are,” said Shawna, correcting him. She didn’t want to relay news of Alexandra’s death until she was able to do so in a respectful fashion, explaining things in her own words. For all she knew, this woman would call her neighbor as soon as they left.

“Can’t help you,” the woman said, returning the photo. “You’ll have to come back when he’s home.”

He, thought Shawna. It’s a man, and he lives there alone.

“Would that be Mr. Lemke?” she asked. “Is that who we’re looking for?”

“Come along,” said Otto, slipping his arm around Shawna as if she were a benign lunatic who had strayed too far from the asylum. He was lighthearted about this, but she still found it annoying. She kept her eyes

fixed on the neighbor lady. "But you recognize her, right? She used to live here? They were married, weren't they?"

The woman went back into her house and closed the door.

Otto was smirking. "Nice work, Sherlock."

"Fuck you."

"I believe that was the plan, yes."

She began walking across the street. "You can forget that shit."

"Aw . . . dude."

"You saw her expression, didn't you? She recognized Alexandra."

"Yeah. The fucked-up junkie who used to live across the street. Wonder why she wasn't more helpful?"

"How do you know Alexandra was already fucked up? She could've had a grace period. She and her husband could've still been . . . you know . . ."

"Honeymooning."

"Yeah . . . in a manner of speaking." She studied his face for a moment, wondering where he planned to go with that.

"You're funny," he said.

"Am I?"

"Yeah. For a 'grrrl on the loose' who doesn't believe in marriage."

She gaped at him. "By which you mean . . . ?"

"Just that you seem determined for her to have been married. You've got one letter . . . a nice letter, granted . . . and now you've got this whole chick-flick message-in-a-bottle thing going on, and I find it a little strange that you're doing that, that's all."

"Strange," she repeated in the most neutral tone she could muster.

"Not strange. Just . . . it doesn't seem like you at all. Is it for your blog or what?"

She didn't defend herself, since she had just figured out what he meant: *Why can't you be that way about us? If you can make all this fuss over a dead woman's romance, why not ours?* His big, wounded, monkey-loving heart was fully exposed.

She picked her words with care. "I want her to have been happy. It's not about marriage. Yes, it's partially for the blog . . . but it's also about . . . I dunno. Wouldn't you like to know that someone had at least been kind to her before the drugs took over?"

He didn't answer right away. He seemed to be considering the perils of pursuing this discussion. "Fine. Sure. Why not leave a note, then?"

"Funny you should say that." Perhaps a little too jocular now, she reached into her shoulder bag and removed the note she'd composed that morning.

He asked her what it said.

"Just that I'm a friend of Alexandra Lemke . . . who used to live here . . . and that she died this week at SF General . . . and to call me if they knew her and want to talk."

"That should do it," he said.

She slipped the note under the door.

"It's certainly worth a shot," she said.

"It always is," he said vaguely.

She was pretty sure he was talking about them.

Waiting for Word

The worst thing about trimming dead fronds from tree ferns was the itchy brown dust that clung to Jake's skin every time he tackled the job. If the ferns were tall, like the ones in this particular garden, the nasty shit would fall into his eyes whenever he looked up, or creep down his collar onto his neck, like the needling remnants of a haircut. As pleased as he was about his newly forested forearms, all that hair was a magnet for fern dust, and he would find himself—as he did now—scratching like an addict in withdrawal.

“You okay?” Michael was stacking the fronds for removal to the truck. “I could spell you for a while.”

“Nah. I'm good.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Jake was trying hard to make an extra effort, since he planned, any minute now, to ask a favor of Michael that probably couldn't come at a worse time. Business was lousy, and Michael's shoulder was giving him more trouble than usual. If that weren't enough, Michael seemed weirdly distracted and distant today. Jake was even starting to wonder if Michael had guessed what was coming and wasn't happy about it.

Still, there was no way to do this but to do it.

“Feel like some coffee?” Jake asked.

Michael didn't answer right away, as if this were a really difficult question. “Sure,” he said, finally. “That would be good.”

The garden they were tending was only a block from the Marina Green, so they hosed off their faces and arms and took their thermoses down to a

bench by the bay. The sky was clear; there were more sailboats than usual for a late-autumn day.

Jake pulled a Clif Bar from his shirt pocket and offered it to Michael.

“No, thanks.”

“You sure? I got two.”

“Yeah . . . thanks.”

Jake hesitated, then took the leap: “Is something goin’ on, boss?” Technically, of course, Michael was his business partner, not his boss, but Jake was still using the b-word and wasn’t sure if he would ever stop. It was a term of respect, more than anything.

Michael gave him a hangdog look. “How could you tell?”

Jake shrugged. “Well . . . for one thing, you’re not humming.”

“Humming?”

“You know . . . while you work.”

“I thought that annoyed you.”

“It does, but . . . I figure it would take something pretty big to make you stop.” Jake tore open the Clif Bar and bit off a chunk. “You wanna talk about it?”

Michael gazed morosely at the water. “Mary Ann is in the hospital. She has cancer. I’m waiting for word right now.”

This relief that Jake felt, if only briefly, turned into shame as soon as he saw the tears on Michael’s cheeks. At least he thought that’s what they were. Michael’s eyes were always leaky, especially in the open air, so it was hard to say for sure.

“Why didn’t you say something before?” he asked.

“She asked us not to. She didn’t want a lot of drama around it. Please don’t mention it to Anna. Or Shawna, for that matter. Not for a while, anyway. We’ll know a lot more by this afternoon.”

“What are they doing, exactly?”

“She has cancer. She’s having a hysterectomy.”

Jake just stared at him silently. At first he thought Michael was making a twisted joke, until he remembered that people didn’t joke about that.

“I know,” said Michael. “I know.”

It took Jake a while to say anything. “You coulda told me. I woulda kept quiet about it. I coulda been really helpful. I’ve been reading up on it.”

“I know. I just thought . . . I dunno.”

“You just thought what?”

“That it might somehow . . . rain on your parade.”

Jake nodded slowly, absorbing that. “My hysterectomy parade.”

Michael smiled sheepishly. “You know what I mean. It’s a whole different thing for you. Yours will be cause for celebration. Hers . . . not so much.”

“It will be if they get the cancer out.”

“You’re right. Of course.” He laid his hand on Jake’s knee and shook it, as if he were shaking off that terrible word. “So . . . it’s all you want for Christmas, huh?”

Jake felt his face go hot. *Anna must have spilled the beans already.*

“If it’s the wrong time, boss . . .”

“It might be exactly the right time. Ben and I have been talking about going to Maui for Christmas.”

“Really? But . . . then we’d both be off work.”

Michael shrugged. “And neither one of us would have to feel guilty.”

This was something of a revelation to Jake. “You feel guilty about that?”

“Of course. Every time you’re working and I’m not. We’re in this together, buddy.”

Now there were tears in Jake’s eyes, but they had nothing to do with the bite of wind off the bay. He had simply realized that he’d just cleared the last obstacle to his dream.

“You sure about this, boss?”

“Absolutely. I’ll go with you to the hospital, of course. We’ll just be recuperating in different places.”

Swiping at his eyes, Jake told him that Selina and Marguerite had already offered to help during the surgery, but that he appreciated the offer just the same.

“Well . . . that sucks. This is the second hysterectomy I’ve been barred from this month.”

Jake grinned. “You’re not barred, boss.”

“Mary Ann told me it was a ‘girl thing.’”

“Well . . . you won’t get that from me.”

“No . . . guess not.” Michael smiled faintly.

“I’d just rather have a buddy waiting for me on the other side.”

“That’s pretty much what *she* said.”

There was a long, peaceful silence as they both gazed out at the bay, where a square-nosed freighter was sailing out toward the Golden Gate.

Finally, Michael said: “Anna tells me you’re seeing someone.”

Jake shook his head. “Not really. Not in the usual way.”

“Is there a ‘usual way’ around here?”

“He was only here for a few weeks.” Jake decided on the spot not to mention the reason for Jonah’s visit, since it would only endanger the fragile beauty of what had happened before he left. “He lives in a place called Snowflake.”

“Where’s that?”

“Arizona.”

Michael widened his eyes optimistically. “That’s not all that far away.”

“Oh, yeah it is.”

Michael chuckled.

“He wasn’t the right one, anyway. We were on different journeys.”

“Well,” said Michael, “if you were good for each other . . . even for a while . . . sometimes that’s enough.”

For Jake, it was enough to know that another man had desired him enough to risk everything—even the promise of everlasting life—for a kiss.

The Last Thing She Needed

At first there was only a face, floating free in a borderless nimbus.

“Welcome back, Mrs. Caruthers.”

It was such a sweet face, too, so full of kindness that it might have belonged to an angel at the gates of heaven, and she actually entertained that possibility for a moment or two. But it made no sense at all. How could you be welcomed *back* to heaven? And since when did angels have blue titanium lip studs and fauxhawks?

The nimbus melted, like frost in sunlight, and the whole person appeared.

“I’m Seth,” he said. “The nurse.”

“Hey, Seth.”

He was fiddling with a tube—a drip of some sort, she assumed. “You were such a champ,” he told her with a smile. “You did just great.”

Good for me, she thought. *But what does that mean?*

“You barely lost any blood at all,” the nurse added. “Two teaspoons at the most.”

Until now, she had never even thought about how much blood might be involved.

“Did the doctor say if—?”

“She said to tell you the procedure went very, very smoothly.”

“Really? Two verys?” She was starting to wonder if this was how they handled patients when the news was too horrendous to be presented by a nurse. She didn’t need to be told that she was the world’s best patient; she needed to be told that she had the world’s most cancer-free insides. Was that asking too much?

The nurse smiled at her again. "The doctor will be by later to tell you in person."

"What did the pathologist say?"

"Can't help you there, I'm afraid."

"Right . . . of course." She remembered being told that it would take three days to get the results. She decided to focus on being grateful that she hadn't died on the table.

The nurse laid his hand gently on her shoulder. "Get some rest, Mrs. Caruthers."

"Please . . . Mary Ann."

"Mary Ann," he repeated.

"Thanks for saying hello, Seth."

"C'mon. This is the best part of the job."

"Just the same, thank you."

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

The next time she drifted into consciousness, she heard DeDe and Dr. Ginny in quiet conversation across the room, so she kept her eyes shut and eavesdropped. It was scary to do this, but she wanted to make sure Seth hadn't been sparing her the truth.

"You'll need to get her up and walking," Dr. Ginny was saying.

"*Tonight?*"

"Just down to the end of the hallway. Take your time about it, but do it. It'll help with the healing."

"Okay."

Ask her how it went, DeDe! No, don't ask her!

"I expect the incisions to heal rather quickly," said Dr. Ginny. "It helps that she was already so fit."

"I know. It's so annoying."

Dr. Ginny chuckled. "It's just Pilates."

"No, it's genes, dammit. Have you ever seen a picture of my mother? We were born to be hens."

Their soft laughter was encouraging, if not especially informative.

Surely they wouldn't be laughing if the news had been bad.

She was awakened by a metallic rattling that sounded like medical machinery. She opened her eyes with a vague sense of dread, wondering if something had gone wrong and she was back on the operating table. But it was just DeDe, methodically removing dishes from a gingham-lined picnic basket and arranging them on the bed tray.

“Hey, missy,” she said, realizing her charge was awake.

“Hey, pretty lady.”

“Oh, they *did* get you blitzed, didn’t they?”

“What’s this?”

“Don’t worry. It’s not from the hospital. D’or dropped it by a little while ago. We have a nice homemade fruit salad and a lovely *boeuf bourguignon* from Fleur de Lys. Also yogurt and cookies for dessert.”

Just the sight of this fare made Mary Ann nauseous, but she did not have the heart to tell DeDe. “Look at you,” she said instead. “You’re like Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*.”

DeDe snorted. “More like Thelma Ritter.”

“Stop that. You’re beautiful. We have to work on your self-esteem.”

A strained silence followed. DeDe looked misty-eyed, making Mary Ann wonder if catastrophic news was imminent.

“Dig in,” DeDe said at last.

Mary Ann took a bite of the fruit salad, and issued an appreciative “Yum.”

“I’m so happy to be here with you,” said DeDe.

Mary Ann set down her fork, no longer able to bear the suspense. “What have you heard?”

“You haven’t talked to Ginny yet?”

“No.” She had stopped breathing altogether.

“Oh, Jesus . . . well . . . she said the cancer doesn’t seem to have spread to your lymph nodes and your tissues look really good . . .”

“But?”

DeDe shrugged and grinned. “No buts. None that *I* heard, anyway.”

“Seriously?”

DeDe took Mary Ann’s hand. “Would I lie to you, missy?”

There was a cursory rap on the door before an orderly charged into the room with a rollaway bed. “Do you have a preference?” he asked DeDe.

Finding that question hilarious, Mary Ann giggled.

“Don’t mind her,” DeDe told the orderly. “She’s high as a kite. Over against that wall would be fine, thank you.”

The orderly positioned the bed as directed. It was ridiculously narrow. The mattress was sheathed in a thick plastic cover that could easily repel any conceivable bodily fluid. Mary Ann heard it crackling as the orderly tucked in the sheets.

“You can’t sleep on that,” she told DeDe as soon as the orderly was gone.

“Shush.”

“Well, at least get out of the damn Chanel and make yourself comfortable.”

“Not yet. We have to take a little walk later on, and I’m not going out there in my jammies.”

Mary Ann smiled at her knowingly. The Chanel was DeDe’s own suit of armor, and apparently she thought she might still have use for it.

Dr. Ginny stopped by that afternoon and made DeDe’s report official. They wouldn’t be totally out of the woods, she said, until they got the lab reports, but things looked really good. As usual, Mary Ann found herself infatuated with the surgeon and her goddess-like aura of confidence. She envisioned her uterus resting in those strong, elegant hands, no longer capable of poisoning the rest of her body. She had not tried to picture what happened before that. She knew Dr. Ginny had made some very small incisions in her abdomen, but she wasn’t sure if her uterus had exited that way or through her vagina. She didn’t want to know, really. Not now. Not for a while. Maybe never.

“Thank you for her,” Mary Ann told DeDe, as soon as the doctor had left.

“My pleasure.”

“It was sweet of her to stick around.”

“Actually . . . I think she has another one here this afternoon.”

“Another what?”

“Hysterectomy.”

“Oh.” Mary Ann remembered how many notches Dr. Ginny already had in her oncological gun and reminded herself that that was why she was so good at her job.

“What’s the matter?” asked DeDe, catching her crestfallen expression.
“You jealous or something?”
She was, sort of. There was no denying it.

The Way She Wanted It

Ben was back in his studio, still pleasantly buzzed from his long swim at the Y, when Michael called from a job in the Marina to say that Mary Ann's surgery had gone very well. He had just heard the news from DeDe Halcyon-Wilson.

"That's great, baby."

"I know, isn't it?"

"So she's getting out tomorrow?"

"Yep."

"What do we need to do?"

"Nothing, apparently. Just let her rest and help her walk around a little. But here's the thing, sweetie . . . DeDe and D'or have offered to put her up for several days until she gets the lab results, and I was wondering how you'd feel about that."

This seemed like a trick question to Ben. He wondered if Michael was testing his devotion to Mary Ann. "How do *you* feel about it?"

"Well . . . they've got a huge house in Hillsborough . . . with a staff, I think . . . so she'd probably be more comfortable there."

Ben hesitated. "But?"

"Well . . . frankly, I think she'd rather be with us."

"Has she told you that?"

"Well, I haven't spoken to her yet, just DeDe, but—"

"Why don't you ask her, then?"

"If I do, she'll think we're trying to unload her. I know how she is. And she'll agree to it whether she wants to or not."

"Do you think maybe she asked DeDe to ask you because she's afraid of hurting *your* feelings?"

“No . . . I don’t . . . honestly.”

“Then . . . we’ll make her comfortable in the cottage. We’ve already told her she can do it, so we’ll do it.”

Ben wondered what was going on here. Was Michael jealous of DeDe’s attention to Mary Ann? Did he think he would somehow fail Mary Ann if he didn’t insist upon taking care of her? Or maybe—and this was where it got murkier—he was trying to prove that he wouldn’t desert her in her hour of need as she had once deserted him?

The truth, whatever it was, lay beneath the sediment of their shared history, and Ben had not known either one of them long enough to dig it out.

He wrestled with business for several hours, calling it quits around four o’clock. It was awful how the Zen calm achieved from making something beautiful with his hands could be so quickly erased by the demands of taxes and billing statements. But, over the years, he had learned to face the fact that art could not be practiced without the eventual use of numbers—not if you wanted to keep on doing it. His business had been successful for that very reason. At least it *had* been, before the recession.

He swung away from the computer, rubbing his eyes. Roman was watching him intently from his doughnut bed across the room, sensing even now, from the creak of Ben’s Aeron chair and the slow, gray death of the skylight, that it was time to hit the road. The dog was already at the door, his tail thrashing like a flag in a red-state parade, when Ben removed the leash from the filing cabinet. Then, as an afterthought, he snatched the Chuckit! from his desk drawer, causing Roman to begin crooning with joy. That blue plastic ball launcher could mean only one thing: a trip to the beach or the park.

The beach would have been nice, given the clear skies, but Ben figured it would be chilly at Crissy Field and downright cold at Fort Funston, so he took Roman to the Collingwood dog park. When they came through the gate, he counted only three other humans on the field, though there were at least a dozen dogs. *Dogwalkers*, he concluded, with a shiver of disdain, since dogs being led around en masse brought a weird energy to the park. They just stood around looking bored and displaced, like schoolchildren on a field trip, refusing to play with each other when they weren’t ganging up on the rest.

Today, however, Roman had found a familiar face: Blossom.

While the terrier and the doodle wrestled, Ben spotted Blossom's doting dad sitting alone on a bench at the far end of the park. He had no choice but to acknowledge Cliff with a wave, but he was relieved when the old man seemed not to have noticed. After their exchange at the Y, he'd had enough Cliff for the day. He wasn't sure what they'd talk about this soon. For all his implied tragedy, Cliff just wasn't that interesting.

He looked back at the roughhousing dogs, grateful for a reason to turn away from the old man, but Roman quickly lost interest in Blossom and ran off to harvest a tennis ball. Blossom looked crestfallen for a moment, then left to join the listless dogs on the chain gang. When Roman returned to deposit the slobbery ball at Ben's feet, Ben obeyed the implied command and flung it across the compound. Roman was already halfway there when the ball hit the cyclone fence. He caught it in midair on the second bounce and pranced back to Ben, ridiculous and beautiful, his whole body shouting triumph.

Ben wondered sometimes what would happen if the capricious electricity in Roman's brain fired at a time like this. How would the other dogs react to a grand mal seizure in their midst? Or the people, for that matter, who might get the wrong idea about the foam on Roman's lips. Would he be able to stay by Roman's side, comforting him until the seizure stopped, or would he have to cope with a larger madness? And what about the postictal period? How would he clear *this* room while Roman went nuts?

They'd been lucky so far; the seizures had been at home—or at least inside—so the situation had never arisen. Maybe it never would. Maybe Roman's morning dose of potassium bromide would be enough to keep the beast within him at bay. The main thing was that the seizures not be allowed to come too close together. Otherwise they would begin to dig a sort of neural trench that would make it easier and easier for them to happen.

Ben knew he could easily dig a trench of his own. When it came to dealing with the epilepsy, there was a fine line between caution and constant dread, and it would cheat them both if he crossed it. He wanted to share his life with Roman. He would not be one of those fretful neurotics who robbed their dogs of all spontaneity and fun.

Roman retrieved the ball at least a dozen times before taking time out to slurp water from a bowl at the entrance to the park. Blossom, meanwhile, had joined Cliff at his bench at the end of the park. She was sitting at the old man's feet, barking insistently, though Cliff seemed oblivious to it. His hands were clamped to his knees, and he was rocking slowly back and forth, as if keeping time to his own private dirge.

He was crying, Ben realized. Sobbing.

Ben got up and walked casually in Cliff's direction. He didn't want to draw attention to the old man's state, but he couldn't ignore it, either. As he drew closer, he could hear Cliff's whimpering—a terrible sound, like an animal caught in a trap. He sat down next to the old man and laid his hand lightly on Cliff's back.

The sobbing continued, as if Cliff were still alone.

"Is there something I can do?" Ben asked finally.

The old man shook his head, then wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his parka. "It's too late for that. It's too late for everything."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

Blossom was barking again, so Cliff scooped her into his arms and petted her, obviously trying to compose himself. "My wife is dead," he said at last.

"Oh, damn . . . I'm so sorry."

"I got the word this afternoon."

"Was it . . . a natural death?" That came out sounding totally awkward, but Ben thought it would have been rude to ask if Cliff's wife had died of old age.

"I don't know what it was," said Cliff. "They didn't tell me."

Ben was remembering what Cliff had said earlier at the Y—that his wife hadn't been "with him" for a while. "I take it she wasn't living with you?" he said.

Cliff shook his head. "No. But that wasn't my doing. That's the way she wanted it. She started using drugs . . . a few years after we got married. She ended up needing the drugs more than she needed me. She just went off the rails and never came back."

Ben nodded. *What could you say about that?*

"I tried to give her a good life."

"I'm sure."

“We had one, too, for a good little while.” Cliff pulled the terrier closer until she was licking the side of his face. “Didn’t we, Blossom? We were a family back then.”

Ben found himself moved by this flash revelation of Cliff’s domestic life. “How did you meet?” he asked, trying to draw the old man out of his suffering.

“She was working in a shoe store in West Portal. I was looking for some shoes. Prettiest thing you ever saw. Black hair. Green eyes.”

“How old was she?”

“Um . . . thirty.”

“And this was . . . ?”

“Ten . . . twelve years ago.” Cliff gave him a melancholy look that was tinged with a curious sheepishness. “Think I was robbing the cradle?”

Ben smiled at him. “Not in my book. Love is love. My partner is twenty-one years older than I am.”

Cliff absorbed that for a moment. “That’s right,” he said.

This puzzled Ben. “You’ve met him, you mean?”

“No . . . but . . . I think I saw you with him here last summer. Handsome, stocky fellow? Gray mustache?”

“That’s him.” Ben was still baffled. Michael almost never came to this park. He preferred Stern Grove, out near the ocean, where Roman could run in the grass.

“It’s good to have somebody,” Cliff said, staring vacantly into the distance. “I never saw my wife anymore . . . not for years . . . but just knowing she was still . . . out there made it a little easier to be alone.” There were fresh tears on the old man’s face, but he didn’t bother to wipe them away. “Funny how that works.”

Ben scrambled for something positive to say and ended up scratching Blossom’s silky belly. “These little critters can be really good company.”

“Yeah . . . for a while. Then nothing works anymore. Not even love.”

There was a strained silence. Scratching the dog had brought Ben close enough to smell Cliff’s rotten, gin-infused breath, so he leaned away as subtly as possible.

“Would you do me a favor?” Cliff said after a while.

“Uh . . . sure . . . if I can.”

“Would you see she gets a good home, if anything happens to me?”

“Oh . . . Blossom, you mean?” Ben knew very well what he meant; he was just stalling while he searched for an acceptable excuse. As much as he sympathized with the old man’s situation, this was not a burden he was willing to assume. “You know, Cliff . . . we don’t have a whole lot of room at our house, and Roman tends to—”

“I didn’t mean you. Just see that she’s not left alone.”

“But . . . you understand . . . I really wouldn’t have any way of *knowing* if something happened to you.”

“Oh, you’d know,” Cliff said vaguely. “Word gets around.”

“Still I don’t think you should take that risk. It’s better to contact the SPCA. They’re a great outfit, and I’m sure they have provisions for that sort of . . . advance-need situation. If you like, I can look into it for you . . . get the number.”

It was excruciatingly clear that Cliff was feeling rejected. “I know how to look up a number,” he said.

“Well . . . of course, I didn’t mean—”

“I need to be alone now.”

“You bet. Of course.” Ben rose from the bench, now feeling like a total piece of shit, but glad to be excused anyway. “Take care, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

He didn’t look back once as he headed for the gate with Roman.

It was almost dark when he got back to the house, so he poured himself a tall brandy and took it out to the garden, where a gibbous moon was rising in the lavender sky. He should have done something to help Cliff. He knew that. In his stumbling, shutdown way Cliff had been reaching out, and Ben had effectively ignored him. What was that about, anyway? Was it too personal an act to take responsibility for this old man’s dog? Or at least make an effort to see to it that someone else did?

Yes. It was. No—it was too *familial*—and Ben didn’t want to be an in-law to all that wretchedness and regret. Cliff was just a guy he knew from the dog park; he felt pity for him, but he was repelled by him as well, and he didn’t want their casual connection to become something more formal. It was that simple.

The sad thing, Ben thought, was that Cliff had probably received this reaction his whole life. His social uneasiness seemed part of his very

constitution. No wonder he was feeling the loss of someone who had actually married him, however briefly. If his wife had become an addict, Ben couldn't help wondering if the drugs had driven her away, or if Cliff himself, in his all-consuming cloud of despair, had driven her to the drugs.

Ben was a little drunk now, so he went into the kitchen to get the irises he had bought on his way home from the dog park. He wanted the cottage to be a welcoming place when Mary Ann got back in the morning. Finding a vase on the shelf above the stove, he filled it with water and fluffed the irises for a while. It felt good to commit this small act of generosity in the churning wake of the larger one he had just dodged.

When he put the irises on Mary Ann's bedside table, he saw a T-shirt on the bed next to a gift bag and a spiral of pink paper ribbon. The shirt read PINYON CITY: THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. He had seen that T-shirt before—lots of them, in fact—gathering dust in his favorite general store. It was touching to think Mary Ann had cared enough about their trip to the mountains, even while it was going on, to commemorate it this way. And the fact she had done so on her own made it seem that much more sincere.

He stuffed the T-shirt into the bag and put the bag with her other things on a shelf in the closet. Then he stripped the bed and hauled the linens to the laundry room. She would have clean sheets when she got back, and that would be a good way of saying that she was starting over now, that things could only get better from here on out.

The Anna She Remembered

The guys had been so sweet to her. They had built a nest for her on their sofa and plied her with chick flicks and foot rubs and goodies from the chocolate shop on Castro Street. Almost immediately, she and Michael had begun taking therapeutic walks around the track at Kezar Stadium, though she never stopped being aware of the absence she was carrying. When, on the third day, Dr. Ginny called to tell her the “wonderful news” from the pathologist, she sat down on the bleachers at the stadium and cried in Michael’s arms.

When the guys were at work, she busied herself with her Facebook friends, commenting on their cute pets and cake-smeared children. She didn’t once mention the cancer, or even the fact that she was recuperating, since she didn’t want an avalanche of Rumi poems from people she barely knew, however well-intended they might be.

Her silence on the subject was not like her mother’s silence. She was building a new world for herself from the inside out, and she wanted to do so at her own pace. She had already phoned Robbie at NYU and apologized for texting him about his dad’s affair with Calliope. Robbie had been incredibly sweet about it, saying she would always be his mom, that he understood her feelings, this was strictly between her and his dad. He didn’t seem especially surprised when she told him that she would be hiring a lawyer. He didn’t seem especially surprised about anything. She wondered if he had already known about Bob and Calliope, having heard it from his dad in a scotch-fueled buddy-buddy moment, and had been anxiously waiting for her to find out on her own.

But Robbie wouldn’t do that, would he? He had always been her ally when things got iffy with Bob. Unless, of course, there were no sides to be

taken anymore, because Calliope was already a fait accompli. Maybe he was just keeping his head down, bracing himself for the new administration the way his dad was doing with Obama.

“Are your classes fun?” she asked brightly, trying to show that she still cared about his life.

“Yeah. Pretty much. It’s a little overwhelming.”

“I’m thinking of staying at the city apartment for a while . . . while things are getting sorted out, I mean. Maybe we can grab some coffee in the Village.”

“That would be great,” he said, though not convincingly.

“I’ve got a few more days here, but . . . it won’t be long. I’m dying to see your new digs.”

“Yeah . . . well . . . it’s kind of a mess right now, but—”

“I can help with that. We’ll go shopping . . . get you some nice things.” She heard herself speak this obscenity in her own mother’s voice, and it made her blood run cold. “Sorry,” she added penitently. “Clingy mom. Just what you need right now.”

Her energy had increased by the end of the week, so Michael took her with him to Mrs. Madrigal’s house when he went to pick up Jake Greenleaf for work. Anna had been alerted of Mary Ann’s arrival, so she—or someone—had laid out tea and sugar cookies on a red lacquer tray in the living room. Once Michael and Jake were gone, Anna made her entrance under her own steam, inching across the room in a pale blue satin kimono, as if to prove to her guest that she was still capable of doing it. Her white hair, encircling her head like a blizzard, was adventurously secured with two large tortoiseshell combs.

“You look wonderful,” Mary Ann told her as they were hugging.

Anna chuckled. “What is it they always say?”

“About what?”

Anna’s long fingers clutched Mary Ann’s wrist. “I need help with this part, dear.” She meant sitting down, so Mary Ann held the old woman’s elbow as she eased into her armchair. “What they always say,” said Anna, picking up the thread, “is that there are three ages of man: youth, middle age and ‘You look wonderful.’”

Mary Ann smiled. “Well, just the same . . . it’s true.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Your hair has always been amazing. I remember those fabulous chopsticks you used to wear.”

Anna wore a look of amused chagrin. “I’m afraid Mr. Greenleaf won’t let me wear those anymore. I took a little tumble one night and almost harpooned the cat.”

This was very much the Anna she remembered: warm and self-mocking and completely present. And somehow that made it even harder to accept how frail she’d become since Mary Ann’s last visit. The spirit was still there, blazing away, but her shrinking body seemed barely able to contain it anymore. Only two years earlier Mrs. Madrigal had somehow wrenched herself out of a stroke-induced coma with nothing to show for it afterward but a few more roses in her cheeks. But that was then, and she had changed considerably. There was no denying what time was taking from her.

“Help yourself to tea,” Anna told her. “I can’t trust myself with the pouring.”

“That’s okay. I had coffee at Michael’s. I’ll take one of these, though. They look yummy.” She nibbled on a cookie, mostly so Anna could feel like a hostess.

“Are you holding up, dear?” Those Wedgwood-blue eyes were fixed firmly on Mary Ann, expecting nothing less than the truth, as usual.

“How much did Mouse tell you?”

“He said you have a clean bill of health . . .”

“Yes . . . well . . . yes!”

“ . . . and you’re leaving the . . . uh, Republican gentleman . . . because you saw him having an indiscretion on the Internet.”

Mary Ann grinned ruefully. “Close enough.”

“So how are you holding up?”

“Oh . . .” Mary Ann made a mumbling noise that was meant to tell the truth without overtly complaining. “I’ve had better centuries, I guess.”

Anna chuckled. “Haven’t we all?”

It surprised her somewhat to hear Anna say this. “C’mon. You live in the moment better than anyone I’ve ever known.”

Anna shrugged. “We don’t have much choice, do we? But that doesn’t mean I don’t have . . . my special favorites when it comes to centuries.”

Mary Ann laughed.

"This one is too complicated for me," Anna continued. "Thank goodness for Mr. Greenleaf. I wouldn't know how to make so much as a phone call."

"I know what you mean."

"Are Michael and Ben taking good care of you?" Anna asked.

"Oh yes. More than I deserve."

Anna frowned. "What do you mean?"

Mary Ann felt a tightening in her throat. It was not that far removed from how she felt on mountain roads. She dreaded making this hairpin turn, but she had to, if she was ever going to get off the cliff. She was leaving in a few days, heading home to mop up the mess of her second failed marriage, so postponement was no longer an option. It was not unreasonable to think this could be the last time she'd ever see Anna.

"I treated you all so badly," she said at last.

"Who?"

"All of you. Brian and Shawna . . . Michael . . . who was sick, for God's sake, maybe even dying."

"How did you treat us badly?"

"By leaving. By running away and never looking back."

"Twenty years ago, Mary Ann. You were following your heart's desire. I did that myself, dear, need I remind you. I left a wife and a two-year-old daughter without explanation." Mrs. Madrigal's face clouded over. Mary Ann knew she was remembering Mona, the daughter in question, whom she'd lost to breast cancer back in the nineties.

"But you made up for it," Mary Ann said. "You brought her back into your life and made a home for her." Now Mary Ann herself was remembering Mona, the flame-haired free spirit who had done a "reading" of Mary Ann's garbage the morning they first met in the courtyard at 28 Barbary Lane. There was another one she had carelessly lost forever, without even knowing the actual moment she had lost her.

Mrs. Madrigal gave her a meaningful look. "Daughters, you'll find, are surprisingly retrievable."

She was talking about Shawna now, Mary Ann realized. "I gave it a shot," she said with a sigh. "I invited her out to Connecticut. It's perfectly clear she doesn't approve of me. Why should she? I don't approve of me myself."

Anna fussed with the edge of her kimono, looking impatient. “If you came here for a spanking, dear, you’ll have to look elsewhere.”

In its own way this felt like an absolution, so Mary Ann smiled at the person who’d bestowed it. “I came here to tell you I love you.”

“That’s more like it,” said Anna.

Unscattered Ashes

Almost a week had passed since Shawna left the note at the house on Tandy Street, but so far no one had called. She had told the whole story in her blog, complete with a photo of Alexandra, but she'd thought it best to omit the address, since she didn't want her crusade to degenerate into an act of harassment. This ambiguous ending to her tale of the streets only enhanced its poignancy, she felt, and several of her readers had told her as much. Of course, there was still the issue of Alexandra's unscattered ashes.

Her relationship with Otto was getting wobbly. The first rumblings had come that day on Tandy Street, when he'd accused her of being capable of romance only in the abstract, or worse yet, only for the purposes of her blog. How could she have addressed that without being unkind? How could she have told him that her problem wasn't with romance per se but with Otto himself—or, rather, the thought of permanency with Otto. She loved what they had—the sex certainly, the laughs, the warm body at night—but she had never been able to envision whatever was supposed to come next. Outright rejection wasn't usually in her repertoire, but lately Otto had been forcing the issue.

"Hey, listen," he said, without looking up. He was hunched over a burrito at the Roosevelt Tamale Parlor, his skinny shoulder blades jutting out of his shrimp-colored T-shirt like little wings. "Remember my buddy Aaron with the awesome place in Bernal Heights with the open plan and the industrial skylights?"

"I think. Yeah. Sort of Rob Thomas-y."

"I meant the apartment."

"Oh . . . yeah . . . sure. We dropped off those tumbling mats."

He finally looked up at her. "It's all ours if we want it. He's going to Costa Rica for a job. All we have to do is pick up the rent . . . which, by the way, would be a fuck of a lot cheaper than our two rents combined." He took a bite out of the burrito and waited.

All she could think to say was: "There are clowning jobs in Costa Rica?"

Otto didn't smile. "It's a very eco-friendly country."

"And . . . what? . . . he's an eco-clown?"

"I don't know what he is, Shawna. Why aren't you answering me?"

"Because this isn't about the rent . . . and I don't know what to say to you."

He looked crushed. "Guess you just did."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "C'mon, dude. I love our two or three nights a week. I do."

"What is it? Are you bored with me? Do you wanna be with a woman again?"

She rolled her eyes, trying to keep things as light as possible. "If I do, I'll get one. And you'll be the first to know."

He returned to his burrito for a while, coming back with his final shot:

"That apartment is really sick, ya know. There's even two bathrooms. It wouldn't have to mean anything."

Yes, it would, she thought. Yes, it would.

They parted company after dinner. Not in any dramatic way, but Otto clearly wanted to sulk in private. Shawna walked back to her apartment and worked off her frustration by washing the dishes that had piled up in the sink. Why did he have to be this way? Why couldn't he just be content with what they had and not keeping angling for more? When people started making demands of each other, that's when the trouble started. Lucy had been that way in Brooklyn, and Shawna had grown sick of it.

She rolled a joint from her stash and smoked it contemplatively as she stared at Alexandra's ashes. She wanted this to be over now, so she considered driving to Dolores Park and scattering the ashes on the grassy slope at the upper end, where the gay boys liked to sun in the summertime. There was a great view of downtown from there, and the moon would soon be rising above the urban labyrinth that Alexandra had roamed for the last

years of her life. To give her ashes on that swath of green, high above the fray at last, would be just the imagery Alexandra deserved. Dolores Park, Shawna remembered, had even been a cemetery in the old days, and the name itself meant “sorrows” in Spanish.

It was perfect.

But as soon as she was in the car and heading for the park, that voice in her head, her own instinctual GPS, began directing her back to Tandy Street. She had been there only in the daytime, after all. There would be a much better chance of finding someone home after dark. How could it hurt to check one more time? She wouldn’t even have to get out of the car if there were no lights on in the house. She could just keep on driving, say her good-byes to Alexandra, and be back at her apartment in time for Conan O’Brien.

As it happened, there *was* a light burning at the unnumbered house on Tandy Street. It wasn’t in the front window but somewhere in the back of the house. Shawna couldn’t see the window itself, since the space between the houses was so narrow, but something was illuminating the blind wall of the neighboring house.

It was much harder to park there at night, so she had to comb the neighborhood for a while to find a space. As she was walking back toward the house, it occurred to her that she had never confirmed that the unnumbered house was, in fact, 437 Tandy Street. It was too late for quibbling, though. If her cryptic note about a dead woman had landed in the wrong hands, at least she’d have a chance to explain herself.

Remembering the broken doorbell, she rapped on the door three times.

A dog—*that* dog from the last time—began to bark from somewhere in the back of the house. It was silenced very quickly by a gruff male voice yelling, “Quiet!”

Moments later, the door opened. A large, stoop-shouldered old man stood there glowering at her, holding the little dog under one arm. He was wearing the red Snuggie she had seen through the window. It gave him an absurdly ecclesiastical look.

“I’m sorry to bother you at night,” she said. “I’m the person who left the note last week.”

He just gaped at her, swaying. She realized he was drunk.

“You’re Sheila?”

“Shawna.”

He beckoned her in with a wave of his ecclesiastical arm. This was too much for him to handle at once, so he lost his balance and had to steady himself against the door. When both the dog and the Snuggie escaped to the floor, Shawna was relieved to see that the old man was wearing something underneath: a short-sleeved white shirt and worn-shiny trousers. He was eightyish, she figured, but probably had not been handsome at any age. When she tried to pair him mentally with the stunning Alexandra, the most charitable she could be was *Beauty and the Beast*.

“Sorry I didn’t call,” he said, closing the door. “I’ve had some sorting-out to do.” He was slurring his words, so it sounded more like “shorting out,” which Shawna thought was a good description of his emotional state. She could practically hear the sparks.

“I understand,” she said.

“I can’t ask you to sit down. I have to go somewhere. There’s something I have to do.”

“That’s okay . . . really.”

“How did you know Alexandra?”

“I didn’t, exactly. I brought her to the hospital once. I visited a few times. I just felt a sort of connection with her. She seemed like a good person.” *Why give him the gory details?* she thought. He was suffering enough already. “She was your wife, right?”

He nodded dolefully. “Once upon a time.”

“Before the drugs took over.” Shawna spoke these words softly, almost reverently, not as a question but simply to finish his thought.

“Did she say anything about me?” he asked.

He looked so pitiful and ruined that Shawna couldn’t bring herself to say no. “She saved a letter you wrote her. A love letter. She must’ve loved you very much. You can have it, if you like. Well . . . you wrote it, but still . . . it means something.” She was glad Otto wasn’t here to watch her scrambling so shamelessly for her happy ending. “I have several of her things, in fact. Photos, mostly, but you’re welcome to them.”

“That would be nice,” he said.

He looked so grateful that she was emboldened to go all the way. “I also have her cremains.”

“Her what?”

“Her ashes. She was cremated.”

“Oh.”

“It’s up to you, of course. There might be someplace you’d like to scatter them.”

He seemed to think about that for a moment. “Where are they?”

“In the car.”

“Get them, please.”

She all but sprinted there and back.

He took the ashes from her on his doorstep, holding them close to his chest as if they might somehow escape from him.

“I’m so glad I found you,” she told him.

He went back into the house without a word.

Back Before Bedtime

“It gets dark so early,” Mary Ann was saying, apropos of nothing. She was hugging her knees in the window seat in Michael’s living room, gazing out at the cottage in the garden. The sky above Twin Peaks was almost drained of its magenta stain.

“I hate winter,” Michael announced, slouching in a nearby armchair. “Fucking Daylight Savings. Ben always gets home after dark.”

“Why doesn’t he just leave early? He’s his own boss, right?”

“Yeah, but . . . the traffic in the Mission is god-awful at rush hour, so it’s better just to miss it altogether and sleep in later in the morning.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“He’ll be home soon,” Michael added. “He makes a point of it when he has a play date.”

She turned and looked at him. “A what?”

“A play date. Some hot daddy he met at the Y.”

It took her a while to catch his drift, and then she couldn’t think of anything to say except: “How do you do that?”

“How do I do what?”

“Not be jealous.”

“Who says I’m not?”

“Then why do you agree to it?”

He shrugged. “It’s something we agreed on years ago. I think of it as the price of admission.”

She frowned. “You make him sound like a ride at the fair.”

“Well . . .” He was trying to look devilish.

“Seriously, Mouse. Why?”

“Because men know how men are. I know how *I* was at Ben’s age. You know, too, actually. You were there.”

She appreciated this nod to their wicked youth, but she still wasn’t buying it. “But if two people are in love with each other, if they *marry* each other, for heaven’s sake . . .”

“ . . . then they know enough not to make fucking the deal breaker. They know there’s something much more important.”

She wondered if this declaration was a not-so-oblique reference to her situation with Bob. “But there have to be rules, Mouse. There just do.”

“We have rules. Full disclosure, for one thing. And we’re in bed with each other at the end of the day. Our commitment is for life, and we save our hearts for each other. That way we can have play *and* permanency. If monogamy becomes more important than fidelity, you’re bound to get hurt. It’s all the lying that clobbers you, not the sex.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Ever tried watching it on Skype?”

He cringed. “That must’ve been awful.”

“And, you know, Mouse, it wouldn’t have been an improvement if he’d told me in advance that he’d be fucking Calliope that afternoon.”

“Maybe . . . but just having to keep something secret can drive a huge wedge between you. And in the end that just makes it easier to fall in love with someone else.”

“Okay, fine. Thanks for the input. Let’s talk about something else.”

He seemed to realize how badly he’d stepped in it. “I don’t mean it’s necessarily right for you, sweetie. It’s not even right for lots of gay men. I just had to decide on what was important and trust in that. Otherwise love turns into a stupid Maury Povich show, where it’s all about lie detectors in the end. I’d rather we had the freedom to play occasionally and concentrate on having the deeper stuff. You know?”

“And he gives you the freedom too?”

“Of course.” He grinned. “Not that I exercise it all that often.”

“Why not?”

“I’m old . . . in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You’re not old,” she said, scolding him with a glance. “You’re my age.”

Ben came home not long after that. Perversely, Mary Ann found herself studying his gap-toothed face for telltale signs of extracurricular pleasure. It was the same old Ben, though, wholesome as cornflakes as he burst through the door with that loopy dog, kissing Michael before dropping a small paper bag on the coffee table.

“You guys feel like going out for dinner?” he asked. “Some place in the neighborhood, maybe?”

“Sure,” said Michael, plastering on a smile for his husband. She was almost certain he wasn’t as blasé about this homecoming as he pretended to be.

“Sushi?” asked Ben, looking at both of them.

“Great,” said Michael. “Sounds good.” He glanced down at the bag on the coffee table. “What’s that, then?”

“Just some baby tangerines.”

“Yum,” said Mary Ann.

Michael looked puzzled. “All by themselves?”

“They were a present.”

“Really?” Michael widened his eyes noticeably. “For whom?”

“For us,” Ben said evenly, looking directly at Michael.

“From . . . ?”

“My buddy at the gym. He bought too many at the farmers’ market and thought we might like some.”

“That was thoughtful of him,” said Michael.

Ben wriggled free of Michael’s penetrating gaze and turned back to Mary Ann. “Are you good with sushi? There’s a new Italian place we could try.”

“You know what,” she said pleasantly, already feeling the suffocating tension in the air, “you guys just go ahead. I’ll curl up here with a book and some Yoplait.”

“You can’t do that,” said Ben.

“Yes, I can. I’d like to, actually.” This was the truth, since she didn’t want to get caught in their emotional crossfire tonight, however civilly it might be played out. Besides, she loved the idea of having the whole house to herself, knowing the guys would be back before bedtime. “Go on,” she said. “I’ll have company.”

She meant Roman, of course, who was already sprawled out next to her in the window seat, as if in anticipation of their evening alone together.

Once the guys were gone, she accepted their long-standing offer to use their shower. Compared to the fiberglass cubicle in the cottage, this was a luxuriously roomy space, and the rain showerhead was the size of a Frisbee. Standing beneath a tropical downpour, she used their extension mirror to examine her incisions. She was starting to think of those four little cat scratches as a sort of Map to the Stars' Homes. ("This is where Lucille Ball used to live . . . and over there is the former home of Ava Gardner.")

Her surgery had been like a clever burglary, where the house had been left so tidy you could barely notice that someone had broken in. That had certainly been a bonus, but, more than anything, she was grateful to her uterus for being such a pilferable item, such a sturdy, yet disposable, little carrying-case for cancer. She visualized the bad stuff being taken somewhere far away, somewhere she would never have to go again.

Something soft and fleshy brushed against her knee and made her jump. It was Roman, or rather Roman's tongue, a sensation she was learning to recognize. He had walked into the shower as if he owned the place, which he pretty much did, as far as she could tell. Michael and Ben had been giving him shampoos in here.

"Go on," she said, giggling. "That's very nice of you, but I don't need your help."

The dog just gaped at her as if he needed convincing.

"Go, Roman . . . go find your monster."

His monster was a hard-sided felt cyclops that he was encouraged to mangle in lieu of destroying the sofa cushions. Its white polyester innards were strewn all over the house. He had been through several monsters in the course of Mary Ann's stay.

The dog wagged his tail excitedly and left on his quest. She showered for another five minutes, dried off with one of their thirsty white towels and slipped into clean flannel pajamas. She had told the guys she would curl up with a book, but that had just been a figure of speech. She wondered how many people who said that actually did it, or if they ended up, as she had, back around the campfire of the Web, telling tales to strangers.

But she felt curled up, at least. It was so cozy there on her bed in the cottage, with her laptop at her fingertips and Roman's fleecy body radiating warmth against her leg. Facebook lifted her spirits even more, since there were seven new people soliciting her friendship, two of whom she actually remembered. One was a realtor named Shelley, whom she'd met on a Pilates retreat at Canyon Ranch; the other was someone she had known during her pre-Bob party-planning days in Manhattan. She told both of them about her surgery, calling herself a cancer survivor for the very first time. It felt remarkably good.

She had four private messages tonight. Three of them were just people thanking her for the add. The other was from Fogbound One, the faceless Facebooker who had spooked her by having known Norman Neal Williams all those years ago.

The message said: "Did you like the T-shirt?"

It made no sense to her. The only T-shirt that came to mind was the "Middle of Nowhere" T-shirt from Pinyon City that the guys had left on her doorstep the night before her surgery. She had never even thanked them for it, and, for that matter, didn't recall having seen it since her return from St. Sebastian's. That wasn't especially remarkable, of course, since Ben had a way of tidying things up.

She wondered if Fogbound One had come to her by way of Ben's Pinyon City network. Maybe someone he and Michael knew up there had seen them buy the T-shirt. Or Ben or Michael had mentioned it to someone who was using it now to presume an intimacy with her. It was annoying, at any rate, since the vagueness of the message was clearly meant to force a reply from her. She wasn't taking the bait. Fogbound One was one of those losers who glutted her news feed with reams of their favorite poems and quotations but had nothing much to say themselves. Besides, if this person had really been friends with Norman, why on earth would she want to share *anything* with them?

This was a no-brainer.

She went to her Friends list, scrolled down to Fogbound One and clicked on the x that would defriend this faceless nuisance forever.

The noise on the roof didn't surprise her—or Roman, for that matter. They were both used to the sound of raccoons crossing the compound on their

nightly descent to the gourmet garbage cans of the Castro. They were huge creatures, sometimes four or five of them, so they sounded like sled dogs on the roof. Their chatter was a peculiar clicking noise. Mary Ann remembered that sound from her youth on Russian Hill, but these days it evoked the scaly green aliens in that Mel Gibson crop-circle movie.

Roman had a similar reaction to them, barking furiously at the first indication of their presence. She had learned to make sure all the doors were closed, not because the raccoons would barge in, but because Roman would chase after them. That would not be a pleasant scenario, she'd been warned. Years ago, Michael had owned a poodle whose eyes had, reportedly, gone completely red after a strangling—a *strangling*—by raccoons. These little bastards had *hands*, and were capable of ganging up on even the largest dogs.

The door to the cottage was already closed, so she held on to Roman's collar and spoke to him as soothingly as possible.

"That's okay, little boy. It's just those old meanies."

The dog continued to growl under his breath until the clattering on the roof had stopped and the clicking sound had passed into the neighboring garden.

"See?" she cooed. "All gone."

Roman seized this golden opportunity to solicit love, sprawling on his back in an invitational pose. She rubbed his belly gently for several minutes, until both of them were almost hypnotized into a place of peace.

Then, without warning, the dog righted himself and began wagging his tail gleefully. He went to the door and tapped it once with his paw, asking to be let out. He was making the silly crooning noise he reserved for people he knew.

By now she had heard the crunch of gravel in the garden path, so she assumed that the guys were home. She got out of bed and opened the door. "Go on," she told the dog. "Go give your daddies a kiss."

But the person who had prompted the dog's ecstasy was neither Michael nor Ben but a hunched-over old man in a long black coat. He was holding the handle of a white plastic shopping bag. "Here ya go, Roman," the old man said gruffly, using his free hand to pull something from his pocket. The dog gobbled down the treat and sat waiting for another, as if the two of them had performed this ritual a hundred times before.

“Excuse me,” said Mary Ann, remaining in the doorway of the cottage. “If you’re looking for Michael and Ben, they’re out at dinner.”

The old man said nothing. He was outside the range of the porch light, so it was difficult to read his expression. When he finally stumbled forward, he reached into his pocket again, pulled out a small black handgun and pointed it at her.

“We have to talk,” he said.

Those Damn Tangerines

“Just level with me,” said Michael. “The tangerines were for you.”

They were eating at the Thai place next to the Edge. They both liked this place, but they could never remember the name of it, so they always called it “the Thai place next to the Edge.” Ben had thought they might drop by the Edge afterward, have a few beers together, but the prospects of that were looking pretty dim right now.

“The tangerines were for both of us,” he replied calmly.

“What? ‘Thanks for the sex. Here’s some tangerines for you and your husband.’”

“That was the gist of it, yeah.”

“So you told him you were married?”

“Of course. I brought it up. I referred to my partner. I always do.”

“But he’s single himself?”

“Seems to be. He’s got some kid in Brazil that he’s hot for, but I don’t think he’s here all that much.”

“You understand my concern here, don’t you? Produce is kind of personal.”

“Personal?”

“You know what I mean. Domestic. It feels like courtship.”

Ben tried not to grin, but he did, a little. “He was a nice guy, babe. He just tossed ’em to me afterwards. Said to take ’em home.”

“So he didn’t mention me specifically.”

“No . . . I dunno . . . maybe not. Whatever. If I’d known those damn tangerines would cause so much pain I would have left them at the studio.”

“Is that where you did it? At your studio?”

“No. His condo.”

A long silence.

"Is that worse than my studio?" asked Ben.

"I don't know," said Michael, giving him a lopsided smile.

Ben reached across the table and took Michael's hand. Manual communication almost always worked wonders on him. "I'm yours, babe. You know that."

"Do you know that song about tangerines?" Michael asked. "From the sixties? 'Would you like some of my tangerine? I know I'd never treat you mean.'"

Ben said it didn't ring a bell.

"Claudine Longet," Michael explained.

"Sorry."

"She had a ski bum boyfriend named Spider that she shot."

Ben nodded. "Great."

"Not that that's pertinent," said Michael.

"That's good to know."

Michael gave him a sleepy smile. "I babble a lot, don't I? Don't you get tired of it?"

Ben smiled. "Only when I'm trying to cook dinner."

"I love you so much, Benjamin. And I'm trying to be better. I wanna celebrate whatever brings you pleasure. I wanna stop being the scared little boy and start being the wise old man who's found the love of his life and can finally . . . relax."

"You're there already, babe."

A long, contented silence.

"So," Michael said playfully. "Was it fun . . . Johnny-O?"

"Who?"

"Sorry. *Vertigo* reference. Even older than Claudine Longet. I just meant . . . you know . . . this afternoon. Was it fun?"

Ben knew this was always a ticklish question. "It was okay. His body and dick were nice, but . . . he was a little too self-absorbed to be great sex."

Michael frowned. "That's too bad. I hate it when that happens."

Ben grinned at the noble effort.

"See how well I did?" said Michael.

"You did," said Ben, squeezing his hand. "How 'bout a beer next door?"

They had several beers next door, enjoying each other in the genial crush of the crowd. After twenty minutes or so, Ben went off to pee and returned to find Michael missing. This threw him for a moment, until he realized that Michael was outside on the sidewalk, amid the usual knot of smokers, talking on his cell phone.

Ben joined him just as Michael was putting the phone away.

“What’s up?” asked Ben.

“Just Jake. He wants to borrow our DVD of *Gods and Monsters*. We were talking about it at work.”

“We have to go home, then?”

Michael shook his head. “Mary Ann is there. It’s a good chance for them to have a little one-on-one.”

Ben couldn’t quite picture that working.

Michael discerned his reaction and added: “I figured she could be helpful right now. He’s finally having his hysterectomy next month.”

“He can afford that now?”

“Anna’s paying for it. I told him to do it when we’re in Hawaii.”

“So . . . how exactly can Mary Ann help?”

“You know . . . moral support. He’s nervous about the operation.”

“He still wants it, though?”

“Oh yeah,” said Michael. “More than anything.”

A Man on the Verge

They were sitting on Mary Ann's bed now, but at opposite ends. The gun was still in the old man's hand, though resting in his lap, no longer pointing at her. That white plastic shopping bag lay between them on the bedspread, like a gift awaiting the proper presentation. To make the scene even more grotesquely implausible, Roman was sprawled on the floor, his tail wagging languidly, looking back and forth between the two of them, as if enthralled by their exchange.

"If it's money you want," Mary Ann said. "I can help with that."

She was banking everything on his aura of melancholy defeat. He was drunk, certainly, but he didn't seem out of control. *He doesn't want to hurt me*, she thought. *He's just a pathetic old man at the end of his rope.*

"I don't want your money," he said.

"What do you need from me, then?"

His lip flickered, revealing teeth like crooked tombstones. "Recognition would be nice."

"I'm sorry . . . what?"

"I'm the guy who sent you the T-shirt."

She was looking at his long black coat now, suddenly remembering its silhouette from somewhere else.

It was the man in Pinyon City. The one who had howled at her in the snow.

"Oh . . ." she said, her palm pressing against the top button of her pajamas. "I wondered who'd given me that. That was such a sweet gesture." She was simpering like a Southern belle, but it seemed the only way to proceed in the face of such madness. She would have to stay calm, stay ahead of him. She considered, briefly, kicking him in the chest to get the

gun away from him, since he was old and seemingly feeble, but his finger was still on the trigger, and she didn't trust her recovering body to pull off the kick.

"You must be Fogbound One," she said.

"Clever girl."

"I really enjoy your poems."

"They're not mine. Somebody else wrote them."

"Still . . . they're lovely."

"You shouldn't have lied about Norman Neal Williams."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"What was it . . . you think I lied about?"

"You said you didn't know him. You said you didn't date him."

"Well . . . the name rings a bell, but . . . when was this?"

He looked at her with no particular menace—just sadness—and said her name three times like a charm: "Mary Ann, Mary Ann, Mary Ann."

Only it sounded like someone saying Shame, Shame, Shame.

And the terrible thing was: she bought it. She could own any crime this loony old prick with a gun could lay on her, because she'd gone through the world feeling guilty, and a little more penitence, at this particular moment, could very well save her life.

"I took you to Sam Wo's," he told her. "You hated the rude waiter. Said you'd never come back again."

What?

"And you always hated *this*," he added sourly, raising a large, mottled hand to his throat. She thought for a moment that he was going to hit her, but he just grabbed his stained clip-on tie and yanked it free from his collar.

That was as good as being flashed an I.D. She felt the truth burning in her veins. The only thing left to do was home in that voice, peel back the overlay of alcohol and age, until she reached its deeply insecure and unmistakably dweebie core.

"Norman?"

He didn't say anything, just gave her a bitter, triumphant smirk.

"I thought you were dead."

"That's *because*"—he swayed a little as he made his point— "*you* didn't stick around."

"There was a cliff, Norman."

"I know what it was. It's my goddamn name now."

"What?" She noticed that the hand with the gun was twitching.

"Cliffs have ledges, ya know. Not that you would notice."

"Were you hurt badly? Why didn't you come back to Barbary Lane?"

He snorted. "Yeah. Right. Come back. After what you said about me and Lexy."

Leave it alone, she told herself.

"You didn't care, anyway. You were glad to be rid o' me."

"That's not true, Norman. We called the police."

"And you told 'em where I fell?"

Her silence betrayed all he needed to know.

"See?" he said. "Liar."

"Please put the gun down, Norman. We don't need that to talk."

"Oh, really? Cudda fooled me."

"This has all been a big misunderstanding. You don't wanna do anything rash."

"How do you know what I wanna do? Maybe rash is all I got."

"No . . . Norman . . . it's never too late to talk things out. Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Jesus, she thought. Where had *that* come from?

"I tried to talk to you," he told her. "I wanted to explain about me and Lexy, but . . . you wouldn't let me . . . you stuck-up bitch."

"When did you do this?"

Still holding the gun, he reached into the breast pocket of the coat with his free hand and produced a sheet of dog-eared paper, folded down the middle. She took it from him, opened it and instantly recognized one of her 8x10 glossies from her old TV show, circa late 1980s. Her hair was feathered and enormous. The inscription read: *Cliff—Thanks for the memories—Mary Ann*. It was obviously her handwriting.

"When did I do this?"

"After you got famous. I came to your show and sat in the audience. You didn't even recognize me."

"Well . . . you know . . . it's hard with the lights and all."

And I thought you'd been dead for a dozen years, you batshit pervert.

"They wouldn't even let me backstage so I could explain."

“But this says Cliff. The name isn’t even yours, Norman—”

“I told you. I changed it. What else could I do after what you’d been saying?”

“And you’d been here in the city all that time?”

He shook his head and said, “Bismarck.” The name struggled out of him like a drunken belch.

“Okay,” she said calmly, deciding not to pursue that. “We’re here now. What is it you’d like to explain? I’m willing to listen, Norman.”

He seemed to believe this. He tidied himself up, brushing off his lapels with ridiculous dignity, like a man on the verge of clearing his name.

“Lexy loved me,” he said. “And I loved her.”

“Okay.” *Forgive me, little girl. It’s not okay at all.*

“You were with us,” he said. “You saw how much she loved me.”

This time she just nodded.

“I even thought the three of us could be a family.”

“Norman—”

“No, listen.” He was shaking the gun again. “I know I did some bad things. I know that, believe me. I shouldn’t have put us in those magazines. I shouldn’t have made money off our love. That was the wrong thing to do.”

She was starting to feel a familiar sourness in the back of her mouth. She wondered if he would kill her if she vomited on him.

“I felt really bad about it for a long time. What you said was right. I realized that once I found the Lord in Bismarck. I asked for His forgiveness.”

“Well, you see? We’re all capable of redemption. That’s wonderful, Norman.”

I’m sorry, Lexy, I’m so sorry. I thought you were safe from him.

“Here’s the best part, Mary Ann: The Lord brought me a miracle. He gave me a chance to make it all up to Lexy.”

“Really?” *Really?*

“I met her again when she was all grown up. Completely by accident. She was working in a shoe store, and she didn’t recognize me. That was the miracle: I was able to be somebody else.”

“Well,” she said, struggling for some sort of common ground. “We all need a chance to start over.”

“See! That’s all I wanted to do. Just to be kind to her like a father, give her the love and financial support she deserved. The Lord made that possible for me!”

Mary Ann was thinking maybe college tuition.

“So I married her,” said Norman.

“What?”

“I married her. I took responsibility for my actions. I did the right thing. I’m not like you, Mary Ann. I don’t throw people away like they’re *nothing*.”

She had her hand on her mouth now.

“She was happy with me, too. We both were until . . .” He cut off the thought.

She knew she shouldn’t ask, but she did. “Until what?”

“Until she remembered me. We were making love one night and . . . Lexy remembered me.”

She took her hand off her mouth and just let it fly. She retched the way she’d expected to retch when DeDe brought that Boeuf Bourguignon to the hospital. When she finally straightened up, Norman was still sitting there with the gun, observing her with weary contempt. “Just because you don’t *understand* something, Mary Ann . . .”

She sprang to her feet “No, I don’t, Norman. I don’t understand.”

“Where are you going?” He was pointing the gun directly at her, but her anger had somehow eradicated her fear.

“I need to wash my fucking face.”

“Sit down,” he told her.

“The sink is right there, Norman. There’s no way I can get out.”

“Sit the fuck down!”

She obeyed him.

“Who are you cleaning up for, anyway?”

Good question, she thought. The coroner? Still, she seized a corner of the sheet and wiped her mouth with it. “Where is she now?”

“What?”

“Where is Lexy, Norman? What happened to her?”

Another contorted smile. “Thought you’d never ask.” He lunged in her direction, making her flinch, until she realized he was reaching for that white plastic shopping bag. He pulled it closer and removed a pressed

cardboard container about the size of a small jewelry box. He opened it to reveal a plastic bag full of something gray and granular.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

It’s something chemical, she was thinking. Lye maybe. He’s going to blind me or poison me . . . or disfigure me.

“Norman, please don’t—”

“SHUT UP! This isn’t about you! This is *my* moment.”

Still holding the gun, he used his free hand to yank the plastic bag out of the box and dump its contents onto the bedspread. Then, with priestly deliberation, he began to sprinkle the gritty gray substance over his body—his arms and legs, his chest, even his face, where it caught in the creases, forming a ghastly lunar landscape.

“How about that, Miss Fancypants?” He was mugging at her like a schoolboy. “How does she look on me?”

“What do you mean?” She was almost sure she knew what he meant; she just couldn’t face it. *Please don’t let it be that. Please don’t.*

“You thought it wasn’t real love. But it was. It lasted all this time, and now it will last for an eternity. Lexy and Norman, together forever.”

“Norman, I would never judge—”

“Oh, but you have. That’s why I wanted you here to witness this. That’s why you can’t run away this time.”

“Okay,” she said feebly. “Just put the gun down.”

He frowned in confusion. “What’s the point of that?”

“So . . . I can prove to you that I’ll stay without being coerced.”

“I told you,” he said irritably, “it’s not about you.”

He lifted the gun from his lap and placed the barrel against his temple.

All the Man Stuff

It was only a short bike ride from Jake's place in the Duboce Triangle to Michael's house on Noe Hill, but the last few blocks were killer steep. Jake usually dismounted near the foot of Cumberland and pushed the bike the rest of the way up Noe Street. Tonight, however, his energy was flagging, so he dropped the bike and sat on the concrete stairs to rest. Seconds later his cell began jittering in his jeans.

The sensation moved straight to his heart when he saw who it was.

"Jonah . . . dude . . . wassup?"

"Hey, Jake."

"You in Snowflake?"

"Yeah."

There was a long silence, so Jake prodded him. "So . . . what? You miss me or somethin'?"

"Dude—"

"Guys can miss each other, you know."

"I know," said Jonah. "And I do."

This seemed to be a serious declaration, and Jake could already feel himself blushing. He wondered if losing his uterus would eliminate that, and if, in fact, he even wanted it eliminated anymore. He wanted all the man stuff, for sure, but he wouldn't mind keeping the blushing. It was just his heart doing semaphore.

"That's cool," he told Jonah quietly. "I miss you, too."

"It feels freakin' awesome, too."

Jake laughed out of sheer joy. "That's the *idea*, man."

"It's my first bromance."

"What?"

“You know . . . like Paul Rudd in that movie.”

“I know what a bromance is, Jonah. That’s not what it was. There was a lot more goin’ on than that. We made out for half a fucking hour.”

“Yeah,” said Jonah quietly. “And Heavenly Father has forgiven me.”

“You’re shitting me. Forgiven you for a kiss?”

“The thoughts were unclean, Jake. It was just a blessing that we didn’t go any further.”

“So . . . as long as there’s no peen involved, you’re not being queer. Is that what you’re telling me here? Is that what your fucking therapist told you?”

“Dude, c’mon. I think you’re a great guy. Even though you’re gay, I—”

“Even?”

“The Lord has forgiveness for everyone, Jake.”

“Fuck your forgiveness, dude. And fuck you for being too much of a coward to face your own truth. You wanted me bad and you know it.”

“My therapist said you’d say that.”

Jake hung up on him and sprang to his feet. He grabbed his bike and began pushing it up the hill toward Michael’s house, since he needed physical exertion to calm the storm in his head. He was more pissed at himself, of course, than he could ever be with Jonah. Why couldn’t he have left it alone? What had he hoped to make of that relationship? Why had he tried to build an eternity out of thin air?

He was a block away, on the steepest part of Noe Hill, when he heard the scream. There was little doubt as to its seriousness—and none at all when he heard the gunshot. He dropped his bicycle on the sidewalk and sprinted up the hill to Michael and Ben’s house. There were lights on in the house, so he approached with caution through the garden. Beyond the French doors he could see Mary Ann sitting on the couch, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. When he tried to get in, he found the door locked, so he kicked through the panes with his boot, prompting another scream from Mary Ann.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s Jake. Are you all right?”

She nodded, unable to speak.

“Is someone else here?”

Another nod as she pointed to the garden cottage.

“Do they have a gun?”

“He’s dead,” she said.

He crossed the garden to the cottage. The door was open, so he could already see the blood pooling on the floor. Moving closer, he saw the mound of the corpse, most of it covered with a long black coat. There was a sunburst of blood on the wall, and a hole in the side of the old man’s head. Jake had never seen this guy before.

Jake heard a whimpering noise that made him jump. Roman came out of the bathroom with his head held low, as if he himself might have pulled the trigger.

“C’mon, boy,” said Jake, feeling sorry for him.

Roman made a slow, cautious exit, stopping only to sniff the corpse’s pocket a few times before heading out the door.

Back at the house Jake called 911. He gave the dispatcher the address and told him: “We have a suicide here. Gunshot.”

Then, thinking about it, he whispered to Mary Ann: “That’s what it was, right?”

She nodded.

He signed off and sat down next to her on the couch. She rolled over and began weeping against his shoulder, softly at first then with a ferocity that caught him off guard. She was like one of those old Greek ladies who fling themselves on coffins.

“It’s okay,” he told her, stroking her hair. “You’re safe now. Jake’s got you. It’s gonna be all right.”

He was getting used to this man thing.

Bad Juju

They had given her a sedative. She had asked for one, in fact. She was tired of being brave, and oblivion had had a lot going for it at the time. When she woke up in Michael and Ben's bed, the house was full of familiar faces: Michael, Ben, Jake, even Shawna, who'd brought Mrs. Madrigal with her as soon as they'd heard the news. Mary Ann thought of Michael's *Wizard of Oz* joke when Roman pulled out of his epileptic seizure: "And you were there, and you, and you . . ." Roman himself was there, in fact, curled up next to her feet on the bed. He'd had something of a trauma himself.

What struck her as peculiar was how remorseful they all seemed. Ben, after all, had not known the history of the old man in the dog park, and Michael had never met "Cliff," so therefore could not possibly have identified him as Norman. Shawna, of course, had less reason than anyone to feel responsible, since she hadn't even been born the first time Norman "died." She'd been totally in the dark about everything.

"I'm so sorry," Mary Ann told her after the others had left for the living room.

"For what?" asked Shawna.

"This whole mess. You don't deserve to have this nightmare laid on you."

"Actually," said Shawna. "I laid it on myself."

This made no sense to Mary Ann. "In what way?" she asked.

Shawna sat down on the edge of the bed. "You don't follow my blog, do you?"

Mary Ann shook her head. "Not a lot, no. I'm sorry." She wanted to explain that the brazenly frank subject matter bothered her because she still thought of Shawna as her little girl, but she knew, better than anyone, that

she had long ago forfeited the right to say that. “*Should* I have been reading it?”

“It might have helped,” her daughter replied with an odd little smile.

“I don’t get it.”

Shawna was fidgeting. “I’ve been more involved than you think.”

“You’re scaring me now.”

“No . . . please . . . don’t. It’s all good. I’d just rather you read it when you’re feeling stronger. Anna told me about the cancer. I’m glad you’re kicking its ass.”

“Thanks, Puppy.” Shawna’s baby name had just tumbled out unconsciously. “Do people still call you that? Besides your dad.”

Shawna shook her head. “He’s never called me that, actually. He said that’s what *you* called me.”

She doesn’t even remember, thought Mary Ann. “Would you mind if I still do?”

“If that’s what you want. Sure.”

An awkward silence.

“They told you about me and Bob, I guess.”

Shawna nodded. “For what’s it’s worth . . . I think it’s for the best. I think you’re gonna make a sick single lady.”

Robbie also used the word “sick” in a complimentary way, but Mary Ann had never gotten used to it. As she basked in her daughter’s smile she realized, with a sense of completely undeserved relief, that Shawna wasn’t doing that awful snood thing anymore. “I love your hair,” she told her. “That’s a nice cut.”

Shawna smiled. “It’s sort of yours, isn’t it?”

As if to confirm this, Mary Ann touched the side of her own head. “I guess you’re right.”

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“No . . . I’m sure.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know, Puppy. There’s not a mean bone in your body.”

Shawna, surprisingly, reached out and took her hand. “I know this sounds funny, but . . . I think this was all for a reason. I think it was meant to bring us together.”

Mary Ann rolled her eyes. “Facebook might have been easier.”

“No . . . seriously . . . we had all the pieces all along. We just needed to talk to each other.” Shawna paused, studying Mary Ann’s reaction. “Do I sound like a total flake?”

Mary Ann shook her head. “You just sound like Anna.”

“Well . . . duh.”

Mary Ann smiled. Mrs. Madrigal had left her imprint, all right.

“Tell me something, Puppy . . . did you talk to the police?”

Shawna nodded. “We all did.”

“Did they say what that stuff was?”

“What stuff?”

“You know. That he sprinkled on himself. They were ashes, right? Cremated remains?”

Shawna stood up, suddenly looking flustered. “Let’s save that for another day. Tonight’s all about getting bad juju out of the house.”

What did that mean?

“Seriously,” said Shawna, catching Mary Ann’s anxious expression. “It’s all good.”

That was another thing the kids said today that offended Mary Ann’s ears. How could that possibly be true, after all? Nothing in the world had ever been “all good.”

When Mary Ann finally joined the others in the living room, they had closed the curtains on the cottage side of the house, presumably to spare her the sight of what she had already seen. Mrs. Madrigal had settled into Michael’s armchair; Jake sat at her feet; Shawna was fiddling with an iPod; Ben and Michael were serving a late supper.

“Pizza,” said Michael with a sardonic grin. “Perfect for every occasion.”

She sat down on the sofa across from Anna. “Are the police gone?”

“Of course,” said Jake, holding up the tube of the vaporizer. “Or we wouldn’t be doing this.” He handed the tube to Anna, who puffed on it demurely and handed it back. Mary Ann flashed on the pot plants Anna had grown at 28 Barbary Lane and the joints she had taped to every new tenant’s door. No one in the house had ever disapproved of that gesture except Norman. For someone so wicked, he had been curiously square.

When dinner was over, Mary Ann followed Jake’s example and sat on the floor next to Mrs. Madrigal. She leaned against the old woman’s leg—

just because it felt so right—and was duly rewarded with the silent benediction of Anna’s hand on her head. Mary Ann wasn’t talking much herself that evening—just listening, just being.

They stayed with her until almost midnight, laughing and playing music and telling stories about the old days. No one talked about the mess that had been made of the cottage, or the man who had made it. When Anna dozed off in the armchair, Jake woke her gently and helped her out to Shawna’s car. Mary Ann’s heart sank as they left.

Michael turned to her as soon as the door was closed.

“You’re sleeping with us tonight,” he said.

She didn’t put up an argument. She slept between them on their big matrimonial bed, like a child in flight from the boogiemanager. Death had been chasing her for weeks, she realized, but not in the way she’d imagined. It had found its intended quarry in the garden cottage and left her to live another day. What she would do with the time she had left was entirely up to her. As she drifted off in that bunker of warm, breathing bodies, it occurred to her that her fear of dying had left far too little room for the joy of living.

It’s all good, she told herself. It’s all good.

Treat

The flight attendant in first class was a gregarious sort who kept talking about how much he'd love to live in "San Fran." She hated hearing the city called that—it jarred her ears even more than "Frisco" did—but he was fiftyish and kind of rugged-looking and, though she couldn't have told you exactly why, struck her as being straight.

"How long were you in town?" he asked, as he replenished her warm nuts.

"Just a few weeks."

"Such a great place."

"It is, isn't it? I used to live there years ago."

"Lucky you."

"Yeah. I'm thinking of moving back."

"Oh . . . wow. You have family there?"

"Yeah." The undeniable truth of this made her giggle. "I do . . . yeah."

"That's great."

"I have to sort a few things out first."

"So . . . you live in Manhattan now?"

She nodded. "I have a little place in the Village." Why mention Darien, after all? It would only make her sound married and boring.

"Where are you?" he asked. "Just out of curiosity."

"Charles Street," she told him.

"I'm on Waverly Place."

"Hey. Small world."

"Isn't it?"

What was the protocol here, anyway? Exactly how brazen could you get with a flight attendant?

“Excuse me,” he said, touching her arm lightly as he headed off to deal with another passenger. She gazed out the window at the cartoon clouds and the endless blue, feeling like a giddy teenager again. He looked a lot like George Clooney, she decided.

When he returned a few minutes later, he knelt next to her and, without uttering a word, left his card on her tray. He had written his phone number on the back.

“Would your friend like a treat?” he asked.

She looked directly into his eyes. “I’m sure she would love one.”

He smiled a languid George Clooney smile as he reached into his shirt pocket for a dog biscuit. She took it from him without comment, leaning down to the Burberry-plaid carrying case at her feet and unzipping the panel on its side.

Blossom gobbled it up with gusto.

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The Days of Anna Madrigal

Dedication

For Olympia, naturally
And once again for Chris

Epigraph

The way to love anything is to realize that it may be lost.

—G. K. CHESTERTON

Some people drink to forget. Personally, I smoke to remember.

—ANNA MADRIGAL

1

Leaving Like a Lady

Summer had been warmer than usual this year, but the heat that throbbed in the East Bay was already coaxing pale fingers of fog into the city. Anna could feel this on her skin, the chilly caress she had come to think of as “candle weather.” She had not owned a fireplace since her landlady days on Russian Hill, but to her mind the proper application of candlelight carried all the primal comfort of a campfire.

She grabbed the purple plastic firelighter on the sideboard in the parlor. Her legs, however, weren’t cooperating, so she steadied herself for a moment, slouching ludicrously on one hip, like Joan Crawford in 1940s gun moll mode. This thing in her wobbly old hand *was* disturbingly gunlike, complete with a trigger and a barrel.

Mustn’t think of it as a gun. Think of it as a wand.

She aimed the lighter at the top of a candle, a stately pillar whose rim had grown satisfyingly wavy with use, though she did not recall having seen it before. She wondered, optimistically, if her companion Jake had been burning it in his room.

“Stop!” Jake sprang from the sofa, having just noticed her above the top of his magic slate. “Not that one!” The alarm in his voice suggested someone arriving at a gas chamber with a last-minute stay of execution from the governor.

Anna dropped her firearm, surrendering on the spot. “Sorry, dear. Saving it for a special friend?” This was naughty of her, since Jake was easily embarrassed, but she liked the notion that he might have found someone worthy of candlelight.

“It’s for you,” he said placidly, shaming her with his teddy-bear dignity. “Got it at Pottery Barn this morning.”

“Ah. Very thoughtful.” She was still confounded by that melted rim.

“I can get some more, if you like it.”

“I do . . . yes.” She hoped this sounded sincere; there was not much you could say, really, about a plain white candle. “And why am I not allowed to light it?”

He took the pillar in his hands, fidgeting with something on the bottom, causing it to glow, candle-like, from within. “Wa-lah!” he crowed.

“Oh my,” she said, unable to manage anything else. Was there nothing on earth this child could not replace with inscrutable electronics?

“You don’t have to light it,” he said. “And you don’t have to blow it out.”

Anna widened her eyes at him comically. “And you don’t have to burn down the house.”

“That too, yeah.” Jake smiled without losing his aura of parental resolve—an achievement, really, from someone almost sixty years her junior. How could she blame him for fretting about this? One afternoon last winter, after the first cold snap, he had come home from the gym to find her asleep in her chair, the remains of an amethyst candle dripping off the end table like a Dalí clock. She had not heard the end of it.

“Here’s the cool part,” he added brightly, soldiering on. “It’s on a timer! You can make it turn on and off whenever you want. Amazeballs—right?”

She had wearied of this “amazeballs” business, but she let it pass; she was touched by the effort he’d put into this campaign. She regarded him benignly until she caught his gaze. “So this is the end of candlelight?”

He hesitated. “Well . . . if you wanna put it that way.”

“How would you have me put it?”

“Jeez, Anna—the End of Candlelight? You just can’t light stuff when I’m not around, that’s all.”

“I understand,” she said calmly, because she did; some of her old playthings now required adult supervision. Her days were full of such small surrenders—why make a fuss over them? You could see them as loss, or you could see them as simplification. Her daughter Mona would have called this an act of faith, this Zen letting-go of familiar pleasures. Anna chose to think of it as leaving like a lady.

“I have bade farewell to flame,” she declared, lifting her hand in a fluttery theatrical wave that she hoped would disguise any actual

melancholy on her part. “And I am so much lighter for the journey.”

He sighed with relief. “Thank you, but you have not . . . ‘bade farewell to flame,’ or whatever. There’s gonna be plenty of flame in your life. Trust me.”

This sounded so strangely purposeful that she was taken aback. “What on earth does that mean?”

“Nothing.” Jake was blushing beneath his stubble, obviously mortified at having said more than he’d intended. He was helplessly chameleonic, this boy, forever blending in with his emotions. “It doesn’t mean anything,” he said.

“I’m not expecting a funeral pyre,” she said.

He scowled at her. “That’s not funny.”

“Well, what does ‘plenty of flame’ mean?”

“It’s just—you know, a figure of speech.”

She knew Jake to be many things, but metaphorical was not among them.

They read in the parlor until bedtime, as was their custom. Anna was reuniting with an old friend from childhood: *Richard Halliburton’s Book of Marvels*. Even now its bulk was downright biblical; it must have overwhelmed her as a child. She turned the yellowed pages slowly, past murky black-and-white photographs of Machu Picchu and the Taj Mahal, a dirigible tethered preposterously to the top of the Empire State Building. The illustrations had never impressed her, but the author’s kinetic prose had more than compensated. His description of Iguazu Falls was a waterfall in its own right, a torrent of subordinate clauses that spilled off the page in a sibilant white mist. Mr. Halliburton, for all his swagger, had been something of a queen, and Anna had responded to that subliminal fact long before she had identified her own particular brand of royalty.

“Whatcha reading?” Jake was looking up from his magic slate.

“Halliburton.”

He grimaced. “Dick Cheney’s company?”

“No.” She shuddered at the thought of that horrid little man invading her beloved tome. “The adventurer. Richard Halliburton.”

No reaction from Jake.

“You know—who had himself declared a ship so he could swim the Panama Canal?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“He was very handsome.” She peered down at the image on the page, a sunburned blond sitting astride a camel. “He wasn’t even forty when he died.”

“What happened to him?”

Anna shrugged. “His junk disappeared.”

“What? You mean . . .” Jake’s brow was furrowed in confusion. “He was like . . . T or something?”

“No, dear. He was not ‘like T or something.’” She leaned on the letter to convey her disdain for Jake’s latest relabeling of their once-exotic species. “What on earth does that have to do with this?”

Her companion shrugged. “You said ‘junk.’ I thought . . .”

“Yes.” She remained patient, assuming a more deliberate tone. “He was sailing a Chinese junk from Hong Kong to the World’s Fair on Treasure Island. It was 1939. There was a typhoon at sea. They never found them.”

“Them?”

“He had a captain and a crew. And a beau, Paul something, who wrote the books with him. They traveled the world together. I guess you could see it as wildly romantic. Two men deeply in love, lost at sea.”

“How do you know they were deeply in love?”

“They’d better have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s preposterous otherwise. A Chinese junk? What on earth was the point? It wasn’t a world record. They were just being *vivid*.”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “But not if they were in love.”

“It would help,” she told him. “I’d be far less impatient with them.” It was difficult, at her age, not to be a little put out with *everyone* for leaving.

Jake was silent for a moment. “How long have you had that thing?”

He meant the book. She ran her palm across it, as if comforting an old cur. “Since before I was me,” she said. She lifted the book to her nose and inhaled the scent lingering in its cardboard bones: a hint of rosewater and Lysol that instantly genie-summoned the Blue Moon Lodge. It was Winnemucca condensed, this book, the only thing she owned that could still predictably take her from here to there.

Bet your book can't do that, she thought.

But she knew that Jake wasn't reading a book. She had heard the telltale cackling of his favorite game, the one with the evil birds and the catapults. The sound of it had bothered her until she'd learned to connect it to Jake himself, to his endless coltish curiosity. There were times, in fact, when she found it almost comforting, like a music box in a nursery. It meant that Jake was there.

"Are you winning?" she asked.

"You don't exactly win," he replied.

"Ah," she said, as she returned to her book.

No, you don't, she thought. You just get to the end.

Notch, her old rescue cat, sauntered into the room and climbed onto her lap. They dozed off together for a while. When she opened her eyes again, Jake was stretched out on the sofa. In the light of his magic slate his cheek was gilt-edged, Rembrandtesque. He seemed to be reading now, so she assumed it was his latest, a book called *American Gods* by an author with whom Jake had once tweeted in a state of delirious fandom. He had even read to her from this book, a passage about a man being swallowed by a giant vagina that had amused them both for entirely different reasons. Or perhaps, come to think of it, the same reason.

That was the lovely thing about Jake: he had come such a long way to meet her. For most of her life she had tried to imagine the company she'd be keeping at the end. There had been both men and women in those anxious/hopeful visions (an ex-wife, a couple of old beaux, and the long-lost daughter she had found and then lost again), but she could never have imagined Jake. He had arrived out of nowhere, like a unicorn in a forest, this man-child who knew her journey as clearly as his own.

She fretted about him, though. He should be having his own life, his own evolving dream of last companions. He was well into his thirties and, since his hysterectomy two years earlier, had become a far more sociable creature. He even brought friends by the house these days—a varied ensemble, to say the least, some bejeweled of brow and brilliant of plumage, others swaggering in Elvis haircuts or prim as movie librarians, pop approximations of their psyches. They seemed fond of Jake, she was glad to see, and some of the ones with boys' names stayed the night.

That's what she fretted about: whether she was cramping his style.

"You know," she said, "the chair in my room is much more comfortable."

He glanced up at her distractedly. "What?"

"It's just as easy for me to read in my room."

"Now, you mean?"

"No, dear—when you have company. You should be able to entertain without having an anthropological exhibit in the corner."

He rolled his eyes. "Read your book."

"Do you understand me?"

Jake grunted.

"And you should know that when you have visitors in your room, I can't hear a thing. These old plaster walls are thick. There's no need to whisper. Just go about your business."

Jake's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How do you know we're whispering? If you can't hear a thing."

"Don't talk back to your elders," she said.

Just before bedtime, Jake brought out the Volcano, a contraption that never failed to amuse Anna in every phase of its nonsensical operation. It was silver and squat—cone-shaped, like a mouse-size space capsule—and its purpose was to deliver the herb, superheated and free of smoke, into the clear plastic bag writhing above it. Once inflated, this voluptuously bobbing bladder would be removed and handed to Anna, who would puff (only once) on a mouthpiece that looked as if it belonged on a wind instrument of some sort, possibly a bagpipe. Jake invariably conducted this ritual with deadpan solemnity, so Anna, out of respect, tried to follow suit, though she could never shake the feeling that they were engaged in an East European clown act, or a fraternity prank involving rubbers and a tank of helium.

The Volcano had been a Christmas gift from a friend, a former tenant at her old house on Russian Hill. Mary Ann had spent her middle years in the East with a well-to-do Republican husband, only to return to the city on the brink of sixty with a pocket full of alimony and a heartbreaking need to ingratiate herself to the past. Jake had only to declare within earshot that fancy vaporizers of this ilk were "seven hundred fucking dollars," and Mary Ann was off and running. She'd presented it to them almost formally during

a picnic lunch she'd organized at Occupy San Francisco. They had no place to plug it in, of course, so full appreciation had been postponed.

"What *is* this?" Anna was holding the valve of the balloon now. She half expected that, if released, it would fly around the room making farting noises.

"What is what?"

"The name. I enjoy the names."

"Oh." He picked up the shiny gold packet from the cannabis club. Its sleek design evoked something you might find in a Japanese grocery store. "Blue Dream," he said, reading the label. "Same as last time."

She inhaled the sweet smokeless cloud and held it for a moment. "Lovely," she said at last. "I think it's my favorite. The Purple Tush was a little oppressive."

Jake chuckled. "Kush."

"What?"

"Purple Kush, not tush." Jake took the balloon from her. "Purple tush—ugh."

She finally caught his gist. "*Oppressive* purple tush, no less."

He laughed like a child who had just been tickled.

"They must have an ointment for that," she added, wanting to prolong his mirth, but was promptly interrupted by the cricket chirping merrily in his jeans. He tugged his phone from his pocket and examined the surface. "It's Brian," he told her.

"Hey, dude," he said into the phone. "Yeah . . . where are you? . . . yeah, the Volcano . . . I know, right?" Jake laughed and turned back to Anna. "He says we're busted."

"Tell him I have a damn prescription," she said.

Jake handed her the phone, grinning. She held it up to where she thought it should go; she was no longer confident about these things. "It's Mary Ann's fault," she said. "We'd hurt her feelings if we didn't use this infernal contraption."

"Oh man," he said. "I miss you."

Those few words, gruffly uttered yet warm and familiar as buttered toast, were all she needed to construct an image of her former tenant: the emerald eyes and snowy hair, that sandpaper dent in his chin. "Where are you, dear?" she asked.

“Pacifica. Winnie can’t go any further.”

Who?

“The Winnebago,” he explained, reading her silence. “I’m in an RV park.”

“Ah.”

“Our connection is shitty. I can barely hear you.”

“Oh—all right then. I’ll give you back to Jake.”

“No, I wanna come visit. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

She knew what that *usually* meant, but with Brian you had to wonder. Could it be that the senior member of her brood, this perennially roving bachelor of (good heavens, no) sixty-seven, had finally found someone worthy of a permanent cuddle? The last time she had spoken to him (when he was parked somewhere in the Great Smoky Mountains), he had seemed placidly committed to his solitude. She had come to believe that his divorce from Mary Ann had forever soured him on cohabitation. Not to mention the fact that Brian had a lovely grown daughter from that marriage, and—to hear him tell it, at least—Shawna had always been family enough for him.

“Is this a new thing?” she asked.

“Yeah—fairly.” He seemed amused by the thought. “Not really, though. We just sort of . . . picked up where we left off.”

“Someone I used to know?”

“No . . . actually. Come to think of it.”

“Now you’re just being mysterious.”

He laughed. “We’ll make a date soon as I’m hooked up.”

“Hooked up?”

“At the RV park! Gotta run, Mrs. Madrigal.”

He was gone, so she handed the phone back to Jake.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“He has a lady friend. He wants to bring her by to meet us.” She fiddled with the cuff of her Chinese pajamas, pondering this enigma until she finally spoke it out loud: “It’s someone he used to know. That I don’t know.”

“Does that bother you?”

“It puzzles me.”

As soon as Jake had helped her into bed and doled out her pills, she found herself wondering why Brian had called her Mrs. Madrigal on the phone. It was an echo of her landlady days, curiously out of time, and she could only surmise that he had reverted to this formality for the benefit of his listening lady friend. These days she was on a first-name basis with all the members of her logical family, since the ever-shrinking distance between the middle of life and the end of it encouraged a level of informality. She had never been a Mrs. anyway. The honorific had been her way of further musicalizing her new name—the pleasing rhythm of “Mrs. Madrigal”—though she sometimes told those who had yet to learn of her past that single women are less likely to be harassed if they are thought to be widows or divorcees.

That was true enough, but there had been another motivation. She had assumed the Mrs. upon her return from Denmark in the 1960s not only to imply a respectable history but also to invent a shadow companion for her daunting new journey. She had married herself, in essence, so she would not be alone in her skin. “There never was a *Mr.* Madrigal,” she used to tell her new tenants at 28 Barbary Lane, and that had certainly been the case from the very beginning. There had only been scared-silly little Andy Ramsey, the lone male resident of the Blue Moon Lodge and no one’s idea of a mister, least of all his own.

Funny, she thought, sinking deeper into the folds of a wilting cannabis balloon. Blue Dream is not that far from Blue Moon.

Then, somewhere beyond the window, out in the white mirage of a desert afternoon, she heard the most curious thing.

It was the sound of a chicken squawking.

A Proper Gentleman

The chicken was in the pen out back, and the ruckus it was making woke Andy from an afternoon nap. They had not kept poultry for some time, so he figured Margaret was turning a trick with the Okie from down the road who sometimes paid in livestock. He wondered if Violet had heard the chicken and if she would be ugly about it at dinner and hurt Margaret's feelings again. Andy couldn't see why doing it for a good hen was any less respectable than doing it for a couple of bucks.

He rolled on his side and gazed at the window shade. It had darkened to amber during his nap, and the acacia bush swam against it like mint in a glass of iced tea. These hot afternoons made him languid and dreamy. They made him think about the Basque boy at the drugstore, with the raven locks and long eyelashes.

"Listen up, ladies!"

Margaret's voice. Addressing the various cabinettes.

"Who nabbed my Lysol?"

Not a good time to open the shade.

"Do you hear me, ladies?"

No reply.

"If I get knocked up—"

Explosive laughter. Probably Sadie's.

"I mean it," yelled Margaret.

"You ain't havin' no baby, Grandma." This time it was Violet being mean. Margaret was forty-five, the oldest girl at the Blue Moon, older even than Andy's mama, who ran the place, so the other girls could be spiteful. Andy figured they were jealous that Margaret had repeat customers. She

was even asked for by name when college boys drove in from Reno, drunk as lords on casino gin.

Violet's wisecrack brought raucous laughter from the cabinettes, but there was no response at all from Margaret. Andy felt bad for her, so he cupped his hands and yelled through the shade. "There's a bottle of Lysol in the crapper."

Another silence, then Margaret spoke in a more subdued tone. "Now there's a gentleman."

Andy knew where this was leading. "Want me to get it?"

"Would you, lamb? If I move an inch, this tapioca is gonna make its way to glory." The urgency of the mission was underscored by the clanky flatulence of a jalopy coming to life just beyond the cabinettes. The customer was already leaving.

Andy hurried out to the crapper and found the bottle. By the time he got to Margaret's cabinette with a basin, there was only a distant plume of dust trailing out to the highway. Margaret was sitting on the edge of the bed in her peach camisole. She looked weary and resigned when he set the basin down beside her on the bed.

"That's gotta be watered down," she said.

He nodded. "Already done it."

"You *have*?" She touched the pee-colored solution with a look of tender amazement, as if he had just presented her with the Hope Diamond. "If that don't beat all," she murmured. "Where can I find one like you, Andy?"

He shrugged, since it wasn't really a question.

Margaret grabbed a sponge off the nightstand and dipped it into the basin, turning away from him as she began to scrub vigorously between her legs. Andy headed straight for the door, eyes to the floor, but Margaret was still talking.

"I swear. What did ladies do before Lysol?"

Another shrug.

"I ain't takin' any chances. That Okie has thirteen kids of his own."

Andy knew that already. Two of the girls were classmates at Humboldt High, compulsive gigglers who lived with their aunt on Mizpah Street. One of them had flirted with Andy on the bus the day before. He wondered if she would be trouble.

"Anyway," said Margaret, "we'll have us some eggs for breakfast."

“That’ll be swell,” he mumbled.

Margaret was still scrubbing away. “I know you like your eggs,” she said.

Margaret knew lots of things about Andy. She knew things that happened before he was born, back when Mama was teaching piano in Rapid City and Margaret was her friend, working at the five-and-dime. Margaret had always claimed that they were both ready to get out of there, and the opportunity presented itself when Mama got pregnant by a piano pupil whose father was, in Margaret’s words, “a big muckety-muck in the Chamber of Commerce and a hotheaded Greek to boot.” Margaret’s mean-as-a-snake husband had keeled over dead at the cement plant a week earlier, so she paid her debt to the Almighty by helping Mama through her ordeal. “She was our salvation in our flight from the Pharisees” was how Mama had put it, implicating the unborn Andy in this biblical-sounding event, but it would be years before he would learn that their midnight motor trip to Nevada had been paid for with cash Margaret had lifted from the notions counter at the five-and-dime.

He would learn this from Margaret, mind you, not Mama. Mama, when pressed on the matter, had said only that Andy’s father was a “a hero of the Great War who succumbed to his wounds”—an explanation that, even at nine, Andy had found unconvincing, since he knew the radio show she was referencing. They had listened to it together, in fact, him and Mama, down in the parlor on a slow night. A doughboy and a crippled Irish girl finding true love in New York City, if only briefly.

It embarrassed Andy when Mama’s lies became this bold, but he could see how a casualty of war would be easier to explain than some horny fifteen-year-old she had taught to play “Clair de Lune.” Even now, Andy’s paternity was vague in his mind, since he had never been able to put a grown man’s face to that nubile phantom. Sometimes he would study the boys in the lunchroom at Humboldt High, other sophomores with vaguely Grecian features, and imagine them in Rapid City with a younger version of Mama, but it led nowhere. Nowhere comfortable, at least.

Mama had been straight with Andy about her business. She was proud of *that* story. She and Margaret would tell it in tandem sometimes, playing to a crowd of rowdy customers in the parlor, Mama banging out the funny

parts on the piano, shaking everything she had. They had been “two sweet-ass gals flying on a wing and a prayer,” though, truthfully, that prayer had not been uttered until their third night in a Bridge Street hotel, when a railroad man, “a perfectly nice gent in a suit,” offered Margaret five dollars to go upstairs and give him a blow job. Margaret had been a knockout back then, a genuine Swedish blond with cornflower-blue eyes who never forgot her makeup. It had been a natural mistake, Mama had insisted, what with all the plug-ugly women out here in the desert, but maybe it had also been a sign from heaven. Maybe a nice girl mistaken for something else had just been shown her true calling in life. Especially if she had gone upstairs as readily as Margaret had.

Their initial agreement had been simple: Mama would find the johns and take their money, and Margaret would “haul their ashes.” There were already a few girls working in cribs on Bridge Street, so Mama took them under her no-nonsense wing, promising a steady income and protection from the johns. By the time Andy was born at Humboldt General in the spring of 1920, Mama was offering six ladies (including Margaret) and setting her sights on a big private spread out on the road to Jungo. The old house was already there, so Mama added the cabinettes, a semicircle of cinder-block huts painted with tall organ pipe cacti, though there was nothing remotely like them growing on that barren expanse. Folks just naturally expected “a touch of the Old West” when they drove out for pussy in the middle of nowhere, so Mona Ramsey intended to oblige them. (Mama used the third person when she got really fired up, as if she were talking about someone else entirely.)

Andy’s first memory was not of the house, or even the huge neon moon Mama had erected by the highway, but the cool, vaulting interior of the Catholic church on Melarkey Street. At four, Andy was a little old for a christening (and Mama wasn’t even Catholic), but St. Paul’s had just been completed, and it was the grandest place in town, a Spanish-style edifice with towers like a castle. Mama wanted folks to see that her son was being raised a proper gentleman. To that end, Margaret had made him a christening outfit with Irish lace she ordered from Denver. Technically, it was a dress, since she had simply enlarged a McCall’s pattern meant for babes-in-arms, but Andy had not complained. He had worn it all day, in fact, chasing a billy goat around the yard. He could still remember how fine

it felt against his skin, and the flinty look in Mama's eyes when he refused to take it off.

When hard times came and poor folks headed west in droves, Mama never lost faith in the business. There were rumors in town that gambling was about to be legalized in Nevada, and she reckoned that was a good thing, since the fools who went bust at the tables would be even more needful of female consolation. She had been right, as usual. The Blue Moon Lodge thrived, gaining a fresh coat of paint and a scarlet slot machine in the parlor, shiny as a new Hudson and emblazoned with an Indian head. Customers came from as far away as Boulder City, where thousands of workers, predictably starved for ladies, were building a colossal new dam.

Lately, Mama'd had her mind set on gold. She had heard from old Mrs. Austin, whose husband ran the general store in Jungo, that Mr. Hoover himself, the former president, had arrived in a private railway car with an oilman from San Francisco and inquired about George Austin's claim in the Slumbering Hills. It was common knowledge, Mama said, that old George and his college-boy sons had been poking in the ground up there. They had recently shipped two bags of gold ore to the mint in San Francisco. Everybody in town was talking about it, but Mrs. Austin had been tight-lipped with Mama, saying only that Mr. Hoover had been a regular feller and that she had grown accustomed to famous folks when she was a nurse in San Jose.

"The nerve o' that woman!" said Mama, wielding her fork like a saber at the dinner table. "There she is, sellin' chaw tobacco to the goddamn section hands, and she's actin' all high-and-mighty with *me*!"

A tiny fleck of mashed potato flew off Mama's fork and hit Violet square in her hennaed spit curl. Margaret winked at Andy; Violet had not even noticed.

"The ol' biddy is about to get filthy rich on that claim," Mama added sourly. "And she don't even have the decency to say so."

"What were you doin' in Jungo?" This was Delphine, the back-talking Cajun girl, but Andy was wondering the same thing. Jungo was over thirty miles up the road, a pissant little railroad junction that made Winnemucca look like Gay Paree.

Mama was glowering now. "Hush up, Delphine."

“If you’re lookin’ to buy property, there ain’t that much poontang in Nevada.”

“Delphine, I mean it. Another word out o’ you and you’re gettin’ that fatty from Battle Mountain the next time he comes in for a dry bob.”

Delphine stared down at her plate as a cautious silence fell over the table. Andy knew from experience that it was in everyone’s interest to change the subject. None of these girls wanted to give a dry bob to the fatty from Battle Mountain.

“What famous folks?” he asked.

Mama frowned at him.

“Mrs. Austin,” he explained. “Who did she know?”

This brought a grunt. “Some feller named London. Who cares?”

“*Jack* London?”

“I reckon. Yeah.”

“Wow,” Andy said under his breath.

“You heard o’ him?”

“He wrote *The Call of the Wild*. We read it for English last year.”

Mama stabbed a sweetbread with her fork and poked it into her mouth. “Well, don’t go tellin’ that ol’ battle-ax. She’s already too big for her britches.”

A smile flickered at the corner of Margaret’s mouth, but she managed to conceal it by turning toward Andy. “How was school, lamb?”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“You pass your history test?”

“A-minus.”

“Get you,” said Margaret, beaming. “You’re heaps smarter than the rest of us.”

Mama shot Margaret a crabby look. “Where do you think he got it from?” Mama had finished high school, while Margaret had dropped out early to go to beauty school in Rapid City. Mama used that dubious advantage to lord it over Margaret whenever they squabbled. Lately, there had been more squabbles than usual, though Andy was not sure why. Maybe Mama was just worn out.

“I saw the Watson girl at the post office today,” Mama offered, reassembling her face to look more pleasant for Andy. “She asked after you.”

He doubted this was true. If anything, Mama had probably raised the subject herself, since Gloria Watson's family was known to be well fixed. Her father was a doctor—a widowed doctor to boot—who had once conducted the monthly exams at the Blue Moon. Mama's coquettish overtures had failed to get a rise out of him (and most likely scared him off the job), so now she was working on his daughter.

"I think she's taken a shine to you, Andy."

Andy sighed so she could hear it.

"What's the matter with Gloria Watson?"

"Nothing. She's very nice. She's dating the class president, that's all."

"Well, that don't make no never mind."

Margaret glanced at Mama sideways. "Leave him be, Mona."

"Andy's a damn sight better-lookin' than any class president."

"Mona . . ."

"Well, look at him, Margaret. He could get any pretty girl he wants."

Andy rolled his eyes. "You're a stitch, Mama."

"Don't you sass me, kid. You know I'm right."

He stayed calm and smiling as he rose and took his plate to the sink. Half the time Mama was just spoiling for a fight, so he had learned not to engage her.

"I've got homework," he said, heading off to his room.

By nine o'clock the yard was full of cars, so Andy stayed in his room, reading under a lampshade printed with a map of the world. Down below he could hear the usual music from the Victrola, the usual howls from the customers and counterfeit squeals from the girls. Not an awful sound, really, just an awfully familiar one, and the wrong accompaniment to *Richard Halliburton's Book of Marvels*. He wondered if Mama truly wanted to go on like this forever, selling good-for-all-night tokens unto death, or if she ever dreamed of being somewhere else entirely. That would be fine with him, unless her escape plan involved the acquisition of a wealthy daughter-in-law, in which case leaving would be just as grimly unimaginable as staying.

He had just turned sixteen, though. There was still time to figure it out.

"You there, lamb?" Margaret was cooing from outside his door, so he invited her in. She was wearing a calf-length green velvet gown that was

balding in places like the arm of an old settee. Her palomino hair was now loosely corralled on top of her head with bobby pins. She was holding a parcel about the size of a shoe box, wrapped in the funny papers and tied up with twine.

“Guess what’s playin’ at the American next week.”

“What?” he replied, before snatching an answer out of the blue: “Charlie Chan.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed, setting the parcel beside her. “Much better—Jeanette MacDonald!”

“Oh,” he said, remembering. “*San Francisco*.” He had passed the glass-encased poster on his way to Eagle Drugs, but the chance of laying eyes on the Basque boy again had dulled its impact considerably. “With Clark Gable.”

“ ‘Together for the first time,’ ” said Margaret, quoting the poster.

Andy did not much care for Clark Gable, with his big tombstone teeth and wooden ways, even if he *had* starred in *The Call of the Wild*. (It was the dog that Andy had most admired in that film.) Jeannette MacDonald, on the other hand, was ladylike elegance itself and not to be missed under any circumstances.

“Wonder if she sings,” he said.

“I expect so.” Margaret gave him a winsome smile. “Wanna go on Saturday?”

“Sure.”

“ ‘Less you’ve got a chum you’d rather take.’ ”

“No.”

She clamped her hands on her knees and stood up. “Well, then—okay. It’s a date.” She headed for the door, leaving the parcel behind on the bed.

“What’s that?” he asked.

She stopped in the doorway and silenced him with a finger to her lips. “Happy birthday, lamb. Latch the door behind me.”

His heart was pounding wildly as he obeyed her order, pushing the metal hook into the rusty eye on the doorframe. He had used this latch hundreds of times before without giving it a second thought, but now, with the din of strangers rising from the parlor, it struck him as woefully inadequate for any secret worth keeping.

He went to the bed and sat where Margaret had sat, pulling the parcel into his lap. It was soft and squishy, obviously fabric, but lighter than the woolen shirt she had made him last Christmas or even the seersucker suit of an earlier birthday. The twine on the parcel was so tightly knotted that he finally gave up the effort and tore a hole in the newspaper—a *Maggie and Jiggs* comic in which Maggie, as usual, was chasing Jiggs with a rolling pin. Within seconds he had liberated the contents, a billowing cloud of lemon silk chiffon printed with roses in pale pinks and greens.

The betrayal blooming in his lap made his eyes dart to the door again. The latch was still firmly in place, but true reassurance came in the fact that Mama had turned off the Victrola and started playing the piano. That meant folks would stay put for a while. She was playing her favorite song, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.”

He rose and went to the corroded mirror on the back of his closet door. The gown was long and sleeveless. There were cape-like flounces at the shoulders and hand-rolled seams at the neckline, all of it diaphanous as a dream from which he was sure to wake at any moment. He slipped it over his head as Mama began to sing.

*They asked me how I knew my true love was true
I of course replied something here inside cannot be denied . . .*

The tissue-fine silk slid down Andy’s body like a lover’s whisper.

3

One Guess

The RV park was a patch of asphalt wedged between the highway and the Pacific. Shawna found her dad's Winnebago easily enough, since he had rescued it from beige anonymity by slapping a Grateful Dead decal on the back. The RV was pointed toward the ocean, practically hanging ten off a crumbly cliff, and its view of the surf was clearly the reason he had chosen this particular park. There was not much to be said for Pacifica itself, a fog-bruised little suburb-by-the-sea, fifteen miles south of San Francisco, that seemed resigned to its mildew and plywood.

She rapped on the door several times, but no one responded, so she pulled her cell from her bag and called him.

"Hey, baby girl. You here?"

"Yep. Where are you?"

"In the laundry room."

Shawna chuckled. By his own account, her dad had once made a practice of picking up women in Laundromats. In fact he had picked up her mom in one, her biological mom, that is—the legendarily louche Connie Bradshaw—though Brian was not her biological father. (That honor fell to some dude Connie had met at the Us Festival, whatever that was.) Brian and his wife Mary Ann had inherited Shawna—and that was the right word—after Connie died of eclampsia in the hospital. Knowing she was dying, she had left her little girl to her “best friends,” though their credentials had been skimpy at best. Brian had slept with Connie a few times, and Mary Ann, a fellow Clevelander, had crashed at Connie's apartment upon arrival in San Francisco. They both liked her, but she had never been their best friend. Brian, however, had fervently wanted a baby, so he regarded the infant Shawna as a serendipitous wonder. Mary Ann, not so much. After

seven years of trying, she gave up completely and made Brian a single dad. A happy one, eventually.

Strangers tended to find this history confusing, but Shawna valued it greatly, and ached to know more about Connie. Mary Ann remembered little beyond the fact that Connie overused the word *fantabulous*. Brian said Connie cried after the sex the night they met, since nobody knew it was her birthday. He had cheered her up by sticking lit matches in a peanut butter sandwich and calling it a cake.

Her dad was a very sweet man. Always had been.

“Doing laundry?” she asked teasingly. “Did you get lucky?”

“Har dee har har.”

“Shall I come there?”

“No. I’m on the way. Hang tight.”

In less than a minute he was rounding the corner with a nylon laundry bag slung over his shoulder. That bag and his creased face and the muddle of snowy curls gave him the air of an old salt home from the sea—which, in effect, he was.

He dropped the bag and enfolded her in his arms. She mumbled “Hey, Dad” into his shoulder, catching a whiff of wet wool and some piney-smelling shampoo. She felt a curious sense of homecoming here on this unfamiliar bluff. She hadn’t seen him for over a year, when he had parked the RV in Petaluma on his way to Cabo.

“So where is she?” she asked, wondering if her dad’s new squeeze was cowering in the RV at this very moment, having chosen not to admit her.

“Taking a hike,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “So soon?”

He did not find this funny in the least. “It’s good for us,” he said soberly, unlocking the door and leading the way into the RV. “I do it all the time myself. This buggy gets a little cramped sometimes. Even if you’re—”

He cut himself off. *In love*, she thought. He wanted to say it, but it would have been too embarrassing at his age to put that enormity into words. He had survived one happily-ever-after, but just barely, and Shawna knew better than anyone how love-shy Mary Ann had made him. Even after all these years.

“I’ve got fizzy apple juice,” he said, dropping the laundry bag and opening the door of his mini-fridge.

“That’s okay. I’m fine.” She collapsed into one of the beige swivel chairs.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

He settled in the other chair. “I talked to Anna last night. She sounded good.”

Shawna shrugged. “She’s okay.”

“What the matter?”

“She’s ninety-fucking-two, Dad.”

“She’s not sick, though?”

“No—just kinda . . . packing up.”

He took that in glumly, saying nothing.

She stroked the arm of the chair, comforting something inanimate in lieu of the more vulnerable human alternative. “We have to honor it, Dad. Anything else would just make her feel alone. We have to—”

She didn’t finish, so he did it for her. “ ‘Drive her to the station and wave good-bye.’ ” He was quoting Mrs. Madrigal herself. Their long-ago landlady had hit them with that sobering train metaphor a few years back. They were not to make a fuss, she had told them, but she wouldn’t mind having “family on the platform.”

Shawna sighed. “How can she be more chill than we are?”

Her dad shrugged. “Always has been. About everything.”

There was a long silence before she said, “Got anything stronger?”

“Stronger than what?”

“Apple juice.”

“Oh . . . sure, kiddo.” He sprang to his feet and pulled a bottle of scotch from the cupboard, filling a couple of café glasses and handing one to her as he sank back into the chair. “Number four on the *Times* list. Worth celebrating!”

She knew he meant that, but something in his smile made her wonder if they *both* had something to share today. If so, it was probably best to let him go first.

“I wanna tell you about Wren,” he said.

Oh shit. Here we go. She’s younger than I am. She’s painfully shy. She’s a raving fundamentalist who was horrified by my degenerate novel.

“Beautiful name,” she offered at last. “Wren, like the bird?”

“Yeah.” He took a slug of his scotch. “We hooked up on Facebook.”

“Mmm . . . racy.”

“Just shut up and listen, smarty-pants.”

“Okay . . . sorry.”

“Here’s the deal: I met her years ago—when you were still a kid, and I was with Mary Ann. We never—you know—did anything, but . . . we had a moment.”

She seriously doubted this. Her dad had a princely heart, and certainly more than a few “moments” over the years—but they had traditionally come *after* he bagged someone, not before. “C’mon, Dad. I don’t care if you did anything.”

“You may not care, but I want you to know why we didn’t. Sex was the last thing on my mind. I thought I had AIDS, and . . . Wren was wonderful about it. Gallant, really. I never forgot how kind she was.”

That stopped her cold. “Why did you think you had AIDS?”

“I was sleeping with someone who had it. Who died of it.” He hesitated a moment. “It was nothing serious—for either of us. She was just—you know . . .”

“A fuck buddy.”

“Yeah.”

“Did she know about it?”

“Did who know about what?”

“Did Mary Ann know about the fuck buddy?”

“No, never—as far as I know. I was planning to tell her, but . . . she left me. She left *us*. It was kind of a moot point by then.”

“So why have you never told me?” This was what bugged her: he had violated their full disclosure contract. There was nothing he didn’t know about *her*, after all, thanks to her former blog, *Grrrl on the Loose*. He knew about her playmates, male *and* female, during her undergraduate days at Stanford. He knew about her stint selling dildos at Mr. S Leathers, and the peep show in North Beach where—briefly, very briefly, for journalistic purposes—she had dressed as a Catholic schoolgirl and diddled herself in a booth for the pleasure of customers at the Lusty Lady. He knew about her bout with chlamydia, for fuck’s sake. It wasn’t fair. His unnecessary little secret left her feeling oddly betrayed.

“I’m not some delicate flower, Dad.” She took a sturdy sip of her scotch, as if to prove the point.

“I know. I should have told you, but—there was very little reason to bring it up. I thought that chapter was closed forever.”

“Until—what? You saw her on Facebook?”

“YouTube, actually.”

“Doing *what*?”

“She was on *Johnny Carson*—once upon a time.” He gazed at her like a soulful spaniel. “Do you even remember Johnny Carson?”

“I’m twenty-nine, Dad, not twelve. What was she doing on Johnny Carson?”

“She was a model. A big one. A large one, I mean.” He made an expansive gesture with his hands.

“Like—plus size?”

“Yeah, except they didn’t have ’em back then. Wren was sort of a pioneer. She was all over the tube for a while. *Carson*. The *Donahue Show*. They called her ‘The World’s Most Beautiful Fat Woman.’”

She was certain he was fucking with her. “Shut the front door.”

When Shawna was a kid, her dad had claimed that there were miles of secret tunnels under Chinatown, that some of the city’s wild parrots were over a hundred years old, that Coit Tower had been designed to resemble the nozzle of a fire hose. These were widespread San Francisco myths, so her dad had left them blithely unchallenged. He had been more committed to her amusement than to the truth.

“I’ll show you the YouTube,” he said flatly.

There was no arguing with that. “So . . . where did you meet her?”

“At the Russian River. I was waiting for the results of my AIDS test. It took a couple of weeks back then, and I didn’t wanna . . . I mean, it would have been awkward with Mary Ann, since we were still very . . . you know, sexually active.”

She left that alone.

“So Michael took me under his wing. He had already tested positive himself, so we went up to the river together. He met Wren at a gay resort.”

“She was bi, you mean?”

He shook his head. “She just liked being recognized. She was very big with the gay guys.”

“So to speak.”

“That’s just the sort of joke *she* would make.”

He was sounding a little defensive, so Shawna tried to make amends. “She sounds cool, Dad. I’m not throwing shade.”

Pokerfaced, he regarded her for a moment. “I’m sure I’d find that comforting, if I knew what it meant.”

She smiled and translated: “I wasn’t trashing her, Dad. C’mon. I used ‘throwing shade’ in the novel.”

“You used lots of things in that novel. I just don’t speak Elvish.”

She flinched, since some reviews of *pvt msg* had been similarly snide. Mostly the boomer critics, of course, who had come late to the party, and were pissed off that someone so young and unknown had written a novel composed entirely of text messages. They mocked the cryptic slang and the soullessness of the lowercase abbreviations as if those devices had been totally unintentional. She had hoped, at the very least, to be recognized as a new experimentalist, but they had treated her more like a Kardashian than a Kerouac.

“Did you really hate it?” she asked.

Funny how his opinion still mattered the most.

“C’mon, Shawna, I loved it. I couldn’t stop reading it. I told you that already. I just don’t understand all the words.”

She was feeling way too needy now, so she let it drop. “Anyway, I think it’s great that you’ve found someone. I’m thrilled for you.”

A slow, sleepy smile from the old man. “Totes?”

“Yep . . . totes.”

“See? My lingo’s improving.”

“Did you learn that in *pvt msg*?”

He gave her a crooked grin. “You think people talk that way around here?” He gazed out the window at the sea where the fog was finally lifting. The pewter skies were slashed open along the horizon, revealing innards of startling blue. Turning back to her, he said, “So what do you think? Do I look like a husband?”

She saw her opening and took it. “More like a grandfather, actually.”

He drew back. “Well . . . thanks for that.”

“No,” she said, smiling. “I mean . . . how would you like that?”

His brow was still furrowed in confusion.

"I'm gonna have a baby, Dad!"

She'd been prepared for any number of reactions, but not the look of abject horror that transformed her father's face before he snatched the glass of scotch from her hand. "What the hell are you doing, then?"

"No, no." She found his panic attack endearing. "I'm not pregnant now. I'm just planning on it."

"Planning on it," he echoed, collecting himself.

"I wanna be a mom, Dad. And I wanted you to be the first to know. I think I'd be good at it . . . and I've made enough money from the novel to support us."

"Us being . . . you and the baby?"

"Yes."

"Is there a boyfriend I don't know about? A girlfriend?"

"Nope." She smiled placidly. "Not a one."

"So . . . not the clown guy."

"No. That's been over for years. And, for the record, he wasn't a clown guy, he was a clown."

This was followed by a silence that could genuinely be described as pregnant. Finally her dad said, "So . . . we're talking . . . insemination?"

She nodded. "Thanks for not saying 'artificial.' I hate that."

"No . . . it's just as real as the other kind, I guess. Just more purposeful." He was trying his best to be hip about this, and Shawna was touched by the effort.

"Anyway," she said. "It's not like I'm afraid of single parenthood. I know I'd be good at it. I had the best role model in the world."

He shrugged off the compliment, then gulped down the rest of his scotch. "So how do you go about this? A sperm bank or something?"

This was another term that sounded clinical and old-fashioned to Shawna's ears. "These days," she said gently, "it's more like a private deposit."

"A friend or something?"

"Yeah. But I haven't asked him yet, so . . . it's nothing definite." She thought it prudent to refrain from elaboration. "I do know *where* I want it to happen."

"Where you want *what* to happen?"

“The Eurovision Song Contest . . . Dad, c’mon! Are we on the same page here?”

He was squirming a little, she realized. “You’ve picked a place for your insemination?”

“Yes! And you’ve been there!”

“Well . . . that’s a relief.”

She laughed. “You’re no fun! C’mon, guess!”

“This is not my idea of a parlor game.”

“Well, it’s not much of a parlor either. C’mon, one guess. There’s a big fire involved. And it’s very flat and dusty.”

His answer, when it came, was equally flat and dusty. “Burning Man.”

“Awriight.”

“No, not all right. That’s a terrible idea.”

“Why? You’ve been there yourself! You couldn’t stop raving about it. You said it was a deeply spiritual experience.”

“Six years ago! It’s completely out of control now. It’s a fucking mosh pit in the desert! It’s gonna be eighty thousand people or something.”

“Sixty,” she said. “And this year’s theme is Fertility 2.0. It’s perfect!”

“Perfectly unhygienic.”

She sighed noisily. “It’s a conception, Dad, not a delivery.”

Her father tilted his head in defeat. “Whatever. You’re right.”

“I want to mark the moment, that’s all. I want my child to know that it was—you know—completely intentional. And there will be friends around, so—”

She was interrupted by the *whack* of an opening door. The woman who climbed into the RV was fiftyish and luscious in a blowsy Wife of Bath kind of way. Her gray hair was gathered into a ponytail, her waist cinched with a wide green belt that caught the color of her eyes and hoisted her ample breasts into full display.

She wasn’t especially fat, but she wasn’t thin either.

“I’m Wren Douglas,” she said, extending a small, pink-varnished hand to Shawna, “and you’re my new favorite writer.”

Shawna could feel herself blushing. “Well . . . thanks.”

“And guess what?” Brian blurted. “She’s gonna make you a grandmother.”

Shawna glared at her father with teen-style indignation until simple astonishment won the moment. “You’re *married*, you mean?”

“Last week in Santa Fe.” Wren waggled a finger wrapped in a turquoise-and-silver ring. “He wouldn’t put out until we made it official.” She laughed throatily. “He said, ‘If you want it, then you better put a ring on it.’”

Her father’s grin was sheepish but without shame. “That’s sorta true.”

“So you’re pregnant, huh?” Wren had moved on jauntily without missing a beat. “That’s great! What a gorgeous child you’re gonna have!”

Further elaboration would have been much too intimate with this stranger, so Shawna just widened her eyes in mute appreciation.

There were times when she seriously wanted to clobber the old man.

Darkwad

So what's the book about?" Ben asked pleasantly without lifting his eyes from his sewing machine.

It already seemed like "his" machine, Michael realized, though they had bought it only yesterday at Serramonte Mall, and Ben had never sewn so much as a trouser hem in all his forty years. But that had not stopped him from leaping into the mysteries of bobbins and threaders with the same bravado he'd no doubt brought to outboard motors and snowmobiles in his adolescence.

Michael, by contrast, was still intimidated by the Kindle in his hands.

"A bunch of high school girls," he answered, describing Shawna's new best-seller. "It's all done in text messages. So far, they're nasty little shits."

"Doesn't that get old?"

"Well, yeah. Nasty little shits do."

"I mean, the text messages."

"Oh—you'd think so, but . . . you get used to it. It becomes its own language. The cruelty is more pronounced because everything's abbreviated."

Ben just murmured, absorbed in his sewing.

"It's creepy as hell," Michael added, "but it's hard to put down."

"They kill one of their classmates, right?"

Michael winced and rolled his eyes. "Not. That. I. Know. Of. Betsy Ross. Thanks for the spoiler alert."

Ben grinned, exposing the gap between his two front teeth. "Sorry. Just read it in a review."

"That's why I haven't read the reviews."

"Shit, fuck, piss!"

Michael checked to make sure this outburst of Tourette's had not been directed at him. Ben, to his relief, was addressing his sewing machine, thereby validating the possessory pronoun. He and Mr. Singer were having their first fight.

"This fucker is supposed to be heavy-duty. The clerk told us it could handle EL wire."

There was nothing useful Michael could add. He had only just learned about EL wire—electroluminescent wire, the magic plastic filament that made clothing and bicycles dazzle like Christmas trees. Ben was sewing a coil of it on the back of a patchwork jacket they had bought at a Tibetan shop in the Castro.

"It's this cotton," Ben added in a calmer tone. "It bunches up, and the needle gets stuck."

"You know," Michael offered, "I like the jacket on its own. It doesn't need anything on it. And I could wear it after Burning Man."

Ben wasn't buying it. "You have to be lit, baby. It's dangerous otherwise. It's pitch-black out there on the playa."

"But won't all that stitching fuck it up?"

Ben looked up. "It'll fuck *you* up if you get run over by an art car."

Michael had already seen enough photos of Burning Man to imagine himself being mowed down by a disco bus full of half-naked hippie chicks—reduced to a grease spot on a vast Nevada alkali flat. He could see that quite easily.

"You don't want to be a darkwad," Ben added.

"A what?"

"That's what they call people who don't light themselves."

Michael cringed inwardly. *Darkwad*. They had *names* for their miscreants, just like at summer camp or on *Survivor*. This temporary city of liberated souls, for all its "radical self-expression," had rules out the ass. Some of them made sense, like Leaving No Trace (cleaning up after yourself) and Decommodification (not selling things to each other), but Michael sensed a creepy expectation of allegiance. It was like school spirit back in high school. He didn't have it then, and he didn't have it now. To him, the biggest advantage of being queer was being queer.

"Come," said Ben. "Try this on."

Michael followed orders, holding his arms akimbo while Ben adjusted the wiring. The jacket was tight around the waist. He felt tubby and preposterous, like Wavy Gravy being suited for the Fourth of July parade in Bolinas. Ben, of course, had looked as smart as a tin soldier when he tried on his metallic silver jacket at a retro shop on Haight Street. Get over yourself, thought Michael. He's always going to be younger than you. Have eight years of marriage taught you nothing?

"That looks so cool," said Ben.

"Does it?"

"Here, check it out." Ben led him, tethered, to the hall mirror so he could see the amber mandala glowing ecstatically on his back. It *was* cool. And all the more so because Ben had made it for him, toiling for two nights at this genteel sweatshop on the crest of Noe Hill. "That's amazing, sweetie."

Ben studied his handiwork, skimming his hand across the top of his sandy brush-cut head. "It's not bad, is it?" He handed Michael the controls, a small oblong box. "Keep it in your pocket. You can turn it off and on or make it blink."

Michael was now preoccupied by a niggling, high-pitched sound, like a mosquito keening in his ear. "What's that?"

"What?"

"That noise."

"Oh. You won't hear that when you're there."

"Why won't I hear it when I'm there?"

"Because it's kinda . . . noisy. A lot of the camps play music all night. The sound of the EL wire will blend right in. You won't even notice it."

Swell, thought Michael.

"I've bought us earplugs for sleeping. And we can take the wave machine with us."

The wave machine, with its faux-oceanic lullaby, made its home on Michael's bedside table. That's where it belonged, he felt, forever and ever. Why should they have to import the sound of crashing surf to the middle of the Black Rock Desert?

"Will I have a place to plug it in?" he asked feebly.

"It works on batteries too. Why are you being so grumpy?"

"Have I said anything?"

“Yeah. More or less. You have.” Ben caught his eye in the mirror. “I thought you wanted to do this?”

“I do.”

“But?”

“I dunno . . . it sounds more and more like a party I can’t go home from. I’ve never liked an all-nighter, Ben, and this is . . . an all-weeker. I get tired of people and noise. Even when I was young, I went home early to Barbary Lane.”

“You said you left the baths at dawn sometimes.”

Michael shrugged. “That was different.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“It wasn’t noisy.”

Ben laughed.

“Not in that way,” Michael added with a smirk.

Ben slipped the jacket off Michael’s shoulders like a tailor done with the fitting. “It’s really peaceful on the playa. We can ride our bikes out there and be totally alone. It’s like being on the moon or something. Just the two of us.”

The image was seductive, except, of course, for the bike part. Michael hadn’t ridden one in years, so he was already concerned about looking clumsy on the pink clunker Ben had found for him on Craigslist. Add to that the presence of large menacing vehicles and thousands of other bikers who assumed he knew what he was doing, and you had a recipe for abject panic. At least it’ll be flat, he told himself.

“Which reminds me,” said Ben, returning to his sewing machine. “We should go on the Naked Bike Pub Crawl.”

All Michael could manage was a snort.

“Seriously, honey. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“No. It would not.”

“Why not?”

Michael returned to his armchair before composing his answer. “Okay, first of all, naked—my flabby white ass on a bicycle seat. Second of all, pub crawl—*drunk* on a bicycle, right? Naked and drunk on a bicycle. Tell me when we get to the fun part. I’d kill myself, honey. In a hot minute. I’d die an ignominious death.”

Ben smiled. “I bet Shawna will do it.”

“Oh, well, there’s a safe enough bet. She’d do that in the *city*.”

“You sound like a prissy old uncle.”

True enough, thought Michael. He had known Shawna since she was a baby. He had become a sort of coparent, in fact, when his old friend Mary Ann made a single dad out of his old friend Brian. He and Brian had doted and fussed and fretted over that child—and later the teenager—to such a degree that the fretting had never stopped. Ben regarded Shawna simply as a hip woman less than ten years his junior. The thought of her naked on a bicycle didn’t make him nervous in the least.

“As I recall,” Ben added, “you used to get naked all the time.”

“When?”

“You know . . . at the nude beach. Devil’s Slide. With Mona. You told me so.”

“That was before you were born . . . practically.” Michael felt a pang at the mention of his old roommate. Cynical, loyal Mona, with her rusty Brillo Pad hair and thrift shop finery. Mona who took no shit and took no prisoners. She’d been gone for a dozen years, her ashes scattered on a Cotswold hillside, but she was right there in the room with him, breathing taunts in his ear, wondering how he’d turned out to be such a scaredy-cat—*such a fucking pussy*—in his twilight years.

“It was Mona who got naked at the beach,” he said, correcting Ben. “I wanted a tan line.”

“What about three years ago in Tulum?”

“What about it?”

“You got naked then.”

“That was around the pool.”

Ben grinned. “So a body of water is required for your nakedness?”

“An absence of *family* is required, Ben. Shawna is family. It feels . . . borderline somehow.”

“We’ll have our tent. We’ll have privacy. Anyway, Shawna has friends in at least three other camps. We’ll probably never see her.”

Michael looked down at the Kindle aflame in his hands, considering its twisted tale and the bright young woman who had somehow brought it to life.

It made him proud and nervous at the same time.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Ben, later that night in bed.

Michael’s gut clenched. “I’ve been thinking” was often the preamble to change of some sort, and Michael didn’t much care for change. He had his life the way he wanted it, more or less. He was happily married; he was still surviving the plague that had wiped out half the people from his past; hell, he was still surviving the meds that had given him a future. He didn’t want that messed with. At all.

“Don’t leave me,” he said, hoping that his darkest fear could convincingly masquerade as total flippancy.

Ben chuckled, pulling him closer. “This bed really sucks.”

“What do you mean? It’s a Tempur-Pedic.”

“I know what it is, and I know how much we paid for it, but it’s just not cutting it, honey.”

Thank you, Jesus. It’s the bed. It’s not me.

“What’s the matter with it?” Michael asked. “It’s memory foam. It’s comfy as all get-out. It molds to your body.”

“It molds to *your* body.”

Michael still didn’t get it. “And yours too, right?”

“Yeah, but . . . when people cuddle all night the way we do . . . and when one of them is—no offense—heavier than the other . . . it forms, you know, a trench that the other one sort of . . . falls into. It’s not a good thing.”

There was so much about this explanation that Michael found charming, but he went for the obvious: “*No offense?* Like I don’t *know* I’m fatter than you are?”

Ben chuckled. “Well, yeah, of course you do, but . . . I didn’t know if you were aware of—”

“The Trench,” said Michael, capitalizing it for extra drama.

“Yes.” Ben grinned. “The Trench from Hell.”

“Damn. That bad?”

“Pretty much.”

Roman, their Labradoodle, loped into the room and sprang onto the bed between them. He knew their nightly routine as well as they did, maybe even better. Michael scratched him behind his ear, where dense charcoal hair, despite their best efforts at grooming, was clumped like an old fisherman’s sweater.

“You don’t feel a trench, do you, Mr. Dood?”

“Give Dad a kiss,” Ben told the dog.

Still standing on the bed, Roman accepted this assignment with quiet resignation, dragging a broad pink tongue across Michael’s ear. How and when Ben had taught him this trick was lost in the mists of time, but it still retained its charm. Roman knew exactly who “Dad” was (at least in this instance), and he’d been known to bestir himself from a comfortable chair across the room, stopping only for a downward-facing fart, before planting a single perfunctory kiss on Michael’s face.

“We can’t afford a new mattress,” said Michael.

“I know,” said Ben.

Of course he knew. Ben was the one keeping them afloat, the one who had stalled foreclosure on their mountain property in Pinyon City and footed the bill on Michael’s recent dental implant. Ben’s furniture company, thanks to a lone Twitter executive with a passion for *tansus* was their most reliable source of income. Michael’s gardening business wasn’t exactly belly-up, but it wasn’t thriving either. His younger partner Jake Greenleaf had done most of the grunt work lately. Gardeners aged better than athletes, but their bodies betrayed them the same.

“Can you handle the trench a bit longer?” Michael asked.

Ben smiled sleepily and pecked him on the mouth. “Long as it takes, bambino.” He pushed his foot through the sheets, across the very trench itself, twiddling his toes against Michael’s in an act of reassuring monkey-love.

“I’ll lay off the jam in the morning,” Michael told him.

Ben chuckled, then fell silent until he suddenly remembered something. “Oh—did you get the message from Shawna?”

“No. On the machine?” Lately, like everyone else he knew, Michael had lost the habit of checking the landline. “What did she want?”

“Dunno. Just said to call her. I figured it was about Burning Man.”

This didn’t seem very likely to Michael. “Why would she call me? You’re the boss of that.”

“Is that right?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. We’re in this together. I just—”

“Whatever.” Ben was obviously hurt, but his fallen features stopped short of a pout.

Michael felt awful. Ben had wanted this to be a communal effort, a grand adventure that would change their lives forever, but Michael's careless words had divorced him from the effort. There were times, he felt, when he didn't deserve this man at all.

"Don't listen to me," he said, apologizing with his toes. "I'm just a darkwad."

Home Free

There was a restaurant near Anna's apartment in the Duboce Triangle, so Brian took Wren there before their visit. It was a corner place with a French staff, a bistro with an alchemical blend of silk lampshades and dark red walls. They looked out on lush summer sycamores turned rusty under the streetlights.

"Seems like her kind of place," Wren observed, popping a *pomme frite* into her mouth. "From what you've told me about her, anyway."

Brian was thinking the same thing, having already felt certain echoes of Barbary Lane. "I invited her," he said with a shrug. He liked Wren's face in this light, the way her own glow fused with the room's. "She said to join her for dessert."

"She's not that mobile, huh."

"Yeah, but mostly I think she wanted to receive you at home."

"Ah."

"Sort of a tradition for newcomers."

"Now you're making me nervous."

He reached across the table to squeeze her small, well-manicured hand. His own hand was piebald with spots, most of them too freeform to be written off as freckles. Liver spots, his dad had called them, back when Brian was still in law school and the old man was feeling his age. *Liver spots*. There had to be a better term, something that invoked a life robustly lived. Steak spots? Burger spots?

"Don't worry about Mrs. Madrigal," he told Wren. "She'll get you, I promise."

"I feel like I'm meeting your mother," she said.

In a way, of course, she was. Not the mother who had died of cancer when he was barely thirty—the Irish housewife from Harrisburg who collected spoons from every state—but the mother who had surreptitiously given him a home in a new city when he was too strung out on women to notice. Anna had been his stealth mother.

Wren fussed with the low neckline of her blue velvet dress. “You sure this outfit’s not too much?”

“Are you kidding? It’s right on the nose. She was raised in a Nevada whorehouse.”

Wren raised an eyebrow, but it was comically intended and more in curiosity than indignation. “And why have you never told me that?”

He shrugged. “Thought I had.” The truth was, he thought he’d told her everything. He *wanted* to tell her everything. His new aim in life was to tell her everything. “She ran away when she was young,” he explained. “Sixteen.”

“Why?”

Sort of an odd question, he thought. “If you were a boy who felt like a girl, would you want to grow up in that environment?”

She pondered the issue for a moment. “Seems as good as any. Depends on the whorehouse, I guess.”

Her cavalier tone made him smile.

“Seriously, women as a rule are kinder than men. Sorry, babe, but you know it’s true. A kid like that would do much better in a whorehouse than . . . you know, a military academy.” She picked up another *frite*. “Did she have family there?”

Brian sawed on a corner of his filet mignon. “Her mother was the madam.”

Wren absorbed that for a moment. “Did she love her?”

“Did who love whom?”

“Either one. Mother or daughter. Son, whatever.”

“Not for a long time. Maybe. Who the hell knows? They didn’t reunite until the seventies. Mona bumped into her on a bus to Reno and got a job answering phones at the Blue Moon. When she figured out their lineage, she brought the old lady back to Barbary Lane. Sorta forced the issue. It wouldn’t have happened if—”

“Wait! Bumped into the mother? The madam?”

“Yeah, the mother, the madam.” He knew this was bound to take a while, so he popped a morsel of steak into his mouth and chewed it.

“And Mona was Anna’s daughter? The one who married the English lord and . . . passed away in England?”

“Yep.”

“So she bumped into her own grandmother on the bus to Reno?”

“Right.”

“And reunited her with Anna, who used to be . . . Mona’s father.”

“Exactemente.”

Wren tilted her head and widened her tigress eyes. “Jesus Christ, you people are complicated.” She reached out with the corner of her napkin and, delicately, did minor repairs to the corner of his mouth. “You realize most brides have an easier time sorting out their in-laws?”

He smiled. “It makes more sense if you’ve lived it.”

Anna’s parlor (as she liked to call it) had been prepped for their arrival: pillows plumped, lighting adjusted, a silver tray of sherry and shortbread laid out on the coffee table next to a red lacquer bowl full of joints. Brian had expected Jake to greet them at the door, since that had been the custom lately, but there she was in all her bohemian glory, spiffed up in Chinese pajamas and wobbling precariously. He hadn’t seen her for months, so the hug he gave her was part reunion, part rescue.

“It’s all right, dear,” she said, patting his back. “I’ve got it.”

With that, she tottered toward her chair. Brian saw Wren move to offer assistance, but he stopped her with a glance and a shake of his head.

“You’re lovely,” said Anna, still inching away from them.

Wren looked thrown. “Me?”

“Yes, dear. Brian doesn’t like it when I call him lovely.”

Wren chuckled nervously and glanced at Brian as Anna pivoted slowly and free-fell into her chair. (The lavender fabric on its scalloped back had grown shiny from many such landings.) Anna took a moment to catch her breath before lifting her hand to Wren like a dowager empress. “What the hell took you so long?”

Wren, who had dialed down her usual megawattage, looked almost mortified as she took Anna’s hand. “Sorry. They were a little slow with the check.”

“What?” Now Anna looked confused.

Brian scrambled to restore communications. “I think,” he said, glancing at Wren, “she meant that remark in the broader sense.”

“I meant,” said Anna, gazing up at the velvet-sheathed hourglass whose hand she was still gripping for punctuation, “this boy has been a tramp. A *vagabond*. I’ve been worried about him. You took your time getting here, dear.”

Brian tried to translate: “Not you *specifically*, of course—”

Anna shot him a withering look. “Yes, her specifically. She’s *exactly* what I pictured. The hair, the shape, the placement of the eyes, everything.”

“Well . . . good,” Wren said awkwardly as her hand was released. “That’s great to hear.”

“She gets kinda spooky about that shit,” Brian explained.

Wren glanced at him slack-mouthed, unfamiliar with his longtime sparring partnership with the rail-thin old woman in the chair.

“Before you know it,” Brian added, “she’ll claim she conjured you up with a love potion and some juju dust.”

Anna gave Wren a weary sisterly look. “He’s so tiresome sometimes. Sit over there, Brian, and have a joint or a cookie or something. I want to talk to your wife.”

She had unbalanced him exactly the way she wanted. “How did you know we were married?”

“A soothsayer,” Anna said curtly. “How do you think?”

Shawna, thought Brian. Or Michael had heard it from Shawna and told Anna. Brian had not yet spoken to Michael, so he hoped he approved, that Michael’s memories of Wren, all these years after that week at the river, were good ones.

Anna had turned her attention back to Wren. “How was L’Ardoise?”

“Scrumptious,” said Wren, pulling up a chair to Anna’s throne. “I eat way too many fries when they have a fancy French name for them.”

Anna nodded. “What does that mean, anyway, ‘L’Ardoise’?”

Wren screwed up her face, pretending to ponder the question. “I think it’s the feminine form of *lard-ass*.”

An odd chortle, uncharacteristically male, erupted from the back of Anna’s throat.

Brian realized with a rush of relief that Wren was already home free.

In the old days Mrs. Madrigal had named her homegrown pot after strong women she admired. There was one in particular Brian remembered—a certain Miss Stanwyck—that could knock his socks off and keep them off for hours until he returned to 28 Barbary Lane from his vulpine prowls at Thomas Lord’s or Henry Africa’s. If Mrs. Madrigal was still up and about (as she often was, reading or even watering her garden in the dark) she would join him for a toke of Miss Stanwyck. She wasn’t smoking with them tonight, but she had not forgotten her manners.

“So who’s this lady?” he asked, passing the doobie back to Wren.

Anna smiled. “You’ve forgotten her name already?”

Brian laughed. “Not *that* lady. The one in her hand.”

“Oh . . . I didn’t name it,” Anna said. “Jake bought it at the medical pot place. They come with their own names when you buy them. Like tea. Or hookers.”

“You’re funny,” said Wren.

“What did I tell you?” said Brian. Even as he spoke, he knew how overeager he sounded, like a little kid showing off an old friend to a new one.

“I grew up with hookers,” Anna added. “I assume he told you that.”

“He did, yes.”

After an interlude of silence, Anna said, “Lysol.”

“What?”

“The whole damned place smelled like Lysol.”

Wren’s nose wrinkled, but she ended with a shrug. “Better than the alternative, I suppose.”

Anna chuckled and looked at Brian. “This one’s no shrinking violet.”

“I’m no stranger to hooking either.” Wren was on a roll now, he realized, obviously feeling the pot. “I mean . . . long as we’re sharing.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “Do tell.”

Brian was starting to squirm a little. “She only did it once.”

“Once is all it takes,” said Anna. “Go on, dear.”

“He was a nice old guy who liked his ladies big, so . . . he made an outright offer. It paid for my vacation, and he had a good time. I’m not sorry.”

“That’s how she met me,” said Brian.

Anna’s brow furrowed. “You were the nice old guy?”

“No, no!” Brian laughed. “She was up at the Russian River with him. I was up there for a week—”

“—with Michael,” said Anna, finishing the thought. “Back in the eighties.”

“So he’s filled you in?” Of course he has, thought Brian. How could he restrain himself?

Anna nodded. “He’s excited about seeing Wren again. He was quite a fan, apparently, even before he met her.”

Good, thought Brian. Michael approves, and Shawna approves, and Anna knows Wren had a career outside of hooking. He was checking off the members of his family one by one, letting the pieces fall into place. (His ex-wife Mary Ann would be a tougher sell—not because she was his ex but because Wren had once been a guest on *Mary Ann in the Morning* and remembered her interviewer as condescending and uptight—an impression that would not have been off the mark twenty-five years ago. Brian liked Mary Ann these days, but he had never been in the same room with both his wives and did not intend for that to happen anytime soon. Why risk it? *Start with easy ones, man.*

“Where’s Jake?” he asked Anna. “I thought we’d see him tonight.”

“He’s out with his friends, being deeply mysterious.”

“How so?” asked Wren, expelling smoke.

“If I knew, it wouldn’t be mysterious.”

Wren chortled, clearly honored that Anna had dispensed with etiquette.

“It’s a project of some sort,” Anna added. “They come around in overalls and tool belts, all smudged and sweaty, but they just . . . clam up whenever I ask them what’s going on.” She paused to sip her sherry. “Maybe they think it would shock me.” She set the glass down again. “I can’t imagine what that would be.”

Wren smiled, then leaned forward to underscore the next question: “Did you ever get back to . . . your childhood home?”

Anna shook her head. “But lately I’ve spent some time there.” She set her glass down with stately deliberation. “It’s something old people do . . . apparently. Dwelling on unfinished business. Old ghosts. It’s tiresome, really. No point in it whatsoever. Especially when . . . what did Gertrude Stein say? . . . ‘there is no there there.’”

Like most seasoned San Franciscans, Brian recognized the quotation. "But she was talking about Oakland, right?"

"Yes, but . . . her *home* in Oakland. It had been torn down, so she had no reason to go back. She wasn't mocking Oakland. That's a common misconception."

Wren was still focused on her original question. "But how do you know it's been torn down when . . . you haven't been back?"

"I've *seen* its absence," Anna told her. "There's nothing but a parking lot and an ugly casino they built in the nineties. It looks like a mall. I've been all around it."

"But . . . I don't understand."

Anna shrugged. "I'm spooky that way—ask him."

Brian was tired of paying for that remark, so he scowled at Anna like a grumpy vulture. "Google Earth, I'm guessing."

She gave him a sly smile. "I think that's the name, yes."

"Did Jake show you?"

A somber nod. Suddenly the joke was over, and a palpable melancholy had taken its place. "There is no there there," she repeated.

Wren wasn't giving up. "But the town is still there, right?"

"Winnemucca," said Brian, trying to make himself useful.

A crooked smile from Wren. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"It was named after an old Indian," Anna said. "Back in the last century. Or—you know—the one before that. I can't keep up with them. He hung around town wearing only one moccasin, so they called him Wunnamocca."

"I don't know whether to believe that or not," Wren said jovially.

Anna carefully arranged one of her fragile long-fingered hands over the other. "I don't make up things, dear. The truth is hard enough to sell."

A long silence before Wren asked: "Would you go back?"

"To Winnemucca?"

"Yes. I mean . . . all things being equal?"

Anna gave her a bittersweet smile. "All things are not equal, dear."

Brian already recognized the purposeful gleam in Wren's eye. His mother (the one with the spoon collection) would have called it "a bee in her bonnet."

“Why not?” asked Wren. “Gimme one good reason.”

They were winding along the coast highway in their rented Ford Focus, heading back to the RV park in Pacifica. The air was still, bordering on balmy. The moon was just a sliver above the dark sea, the tart remains of a lemon Life Saver.

“She’s old,” said Brian. “She’s had several strokes. She falls down all the time. There’s three good reasons.”

“She won’t fall down with us around. She’ll be safer than usual. We’ll make her cozy in the big chair. She can have the private bedroom.”

“What if . . . something happens?”

“What if something happens *anywhere*? It’s just three or four days. And we’d be with her the whole time. I’m sure Jake could use a break.”

Brian turned and looked at her. “What’s gotten into you, anyway?”

“I dunno, pumpkin.” Wren smiled wistfully. “I just wanna know her better. I didn’t expect to like her this much.”

They were silent for a while as the car ribboned along the ocean.

“The point is,” said Wren, sliding her hand onto his leg, “you know she wants to do it. You heard what she said about unfinished business.”

Brian had heard all right, but it made no sense to him. Who could Anna possibly know in Winnemucca after seventy-five years? And what difference would it make?

“Old ghosts,” said Wren, reading his mind.

6

Scorcher

Jeanette MacDonald's coat was slinky satin trimmed in marabou, but Andy had only a moment to admire it before the room shook and the balcony cracked and people began screaming bloody murder. He usually saved a few Milk Duds for after the movie, just to prolong the experience, but he gobbled every last one of them in the three minutes it took for the city of San Francisco to collapse into rubble.

"My goodness," said Margaret as they spilled out of the American Theater into the unglamorous daylight of Bridge Street. "You were wolfin' down those Duds like gangbusters. Scared the hell out of you, huh?"

"It was sure realistic," Andy replied, though truthfully he had been more shaken by Clark Gable's treatment of Jeanette than by the ensuing earthquake. Gable had just *humiliated* her onstage, after all, evicted her from his club and his life, this blustery brute who couldn't recognize true love when it came along. It was almost as if he had *caused* the earthquake. Andy had seen plenty such men, and so had Margaret, but Margaret, oddly, trembled only in the face of collapsing buildings.

"I ate all mine too," said Margaret, holding up an empty box of Red Hots. Andy expected her to blow on it and make it honk like a goose, and that's just what she did, prompting an old lady standing by the ticket booth to jump, then turn and frown at them. He smiled a sheepish apology. Margaret could be childish sometimes.

"I love the song," he said, hoping at the very least to keep Margaret from attempting a second honk while there were people around.

It worked. Margaret puffed up her ruffled bosom, shook her loose platinum hair, and began to sing: "*San Francisco, open your Golden Gate* —"

Andy took it from there. *"You'll let no stranger wait, la, la, la, la."*

They burst into laughter and joined in a duet, heading down the dusty sidewalk like some goofball vaudeville act. *"San Francisco, here is your . . . la, la, la . . . saying I wander no more. Other places only make me la, la, la —"*

"Okay, that's enough!" Margaret brought an end to their routine by yanking on Andy's arm.

"What?"

"You were twirling."

"I was giving it some pep."

"We're making a scene," she whispered. She nodded in the direction of two men in dirty overalls scowling at them from the alley by the five-and-dime.

Andy shrugged. "Big deal."

"You can twirl at home, lamb. Just don't do it here. Folks will get the wrong idea."

Andy could have told her that an old chippie honking on a Red Hots box was making just as big a scene as a boy twirling on the sidewalk, but he kept his mouth shut because he knew what she meant, and because he could hurt her feelings more than she could ever hurt his. They took care of each other in different ways. She did it with movies and tender conspiracies. Sometimes silence was all he could offer.

Margaret glanced at him as they passed Kossol's Kosy Korner. Even there, in the dim glare of the diner on a sober Saturday afternoon, people seemed to be watching them through the streaky glass, including old Kyle Kossol himself. "Did you like your birthday present?" Margaret asked him.

"Uh-huh."

"I thought you'd like those colors."

"I did. Yeah." His face was aflame with mortification and unarticulated gratitude.

"You can't tell your mama, Andy."

"I know." This was not news to him. There was not much of anything he could tell Mama these days. Sometimes he wondered if Margaret actually preferred it that way, since it made him more like her own son and less like Mama's. In that sense it felt like a betrayal of Mama—a form of

desertion, even—but there was nothing he could do about it; his very nature, after all, was the ultimate betrayal.

Margaret had a customer back at the Blue Moon, so she left Andy at Eagle Drugs with the remains of their milkshake. He was stalling for time now, drawing petroglyphs on the frosty canister until the Basque boy showed up for work.

“Want another one?” asked Mr. Yee. He was wearing the same garnet bolo tie he had worn since Andy was a little boy. Andy figured it was to prove he was a cowboy, even if he was an old Chinaman who ran the Rexall. When Mr. Yee was a boy there had been lots of Chinamen in Winnemucca—thousands, even, according to Mama—but now his kind was rapidly dwindling, and that meant he had to fit in.

Andy waved away the offer of a milkshake.

“Hunky-dory, huh?”

“Yes sir.”

“He should be here pretty soon.”

Rattled, Andy pretended not to understand.

“Lasko,” said Mr. Yee, explaining himself. “Your buddy, right? He’s got baseball practice until four. You’re welcome to stay.”

“Oh, right . . . thanks.” Andy’s heart was thumping with anxiety and hope. He wondered if Mr. Yee, through canny oriental powers, had detected his infatuation with Lasko, or if Lasko himself—and here’s where the hope came in—had told Mr. Yee that he and Andy were buddies. In either case the jig was up. Andy poured the rest of the milkshake into his glass and stared at a postcard taped to the mirror.

Lasko. It suited him perfectly—exotic and roughneck at the same time. While his name was officially Belasko (Andy had seen it on a roster at school), the shortened version was all he ever used. Lasko’s father was Mexican, but his mother (a cook at the Martin Hotel and the daughter of a sheepherder) had insisted on Basque names for their children. Lasko had been extremely lucky in that regard; there were no awkward intrusions of x’s and z’s in his name. He had a brother who’d been saddled with Xalbador, and even worse, a sister named Hegazti, which sounded less like a name to Andy than some sort of muttered gypsy curse.

The summer before, Lasko had danced in Pioneer Park at his grandfather's birthday in traditional Basque garb. (Only foreigners were described as wearing "garb," Andy realized, never Americans.) Lasko was as much of a local boy as Andy, but seeing him that day, dashing in his black beret and red-sashed white pajamas, Andy felt every gallant, grueling mile of the journey that had brought Lasko's people from the Pyrenees to Chile and, finally, to the high desert of Nevada. Andy had not been invited to the birthday party, of course—he didn't know these people, and his mother was widely known to run a whorehouse—but he watched, entranced, from a blanket spread under a nearby cottonwood tree. It was hot as the hinges that day. Lasko was dancing hard, so his white pajamas had turned gray in the places where sweat had stuck them to his strong, hairy legs.

"That's the Rexall train!"

Andy nearly fell off the stool when Lasko's voice broke his reverie. Then a hand landed on his shoulder, firm as an accusation and warm as a caress. "Pretty snazzy, huh?" Lasko's other hand was pointing to the postcard on the mirror, but Andy still wasn't seeing it. All he could see was their reflection: one of them seated, the other standing, both looking straight ahead, like a couple in an old daguerreotype.

All too soon the hand abandoned Andy's shoulder, and Lasko was behind the counter, wrapping an apron around his gabardined loins. He yanked the strings so tight he might have been a wonderful Christmas parcel in need of extra protection. "It's gonna be a big deal," he said. "She's comin' through every state in the union."

The train, thought Andy, trying to concentrate. The train on the postcard.

"Why is she doing that?" he asked feebly.

Lasko shrugged as if the answer were obvious. "To let folks know about Rexall. Spread the word. The Depression is over. Ain't she a beaut?"

The train on the postcard was a streamlined cylinder that seemed to stretch on forever, the horizontal cousin of a Buck Rogers rocket ship.

"She's stopping in Winnemucca next month. For a whole day." Now Lasko was wiping the counter with a towel, his naked forearms circling hypnotically.

"But . . . why?"

“So folks can come on board and look at it. See all the Rexall products.”

Andy still didn’t get it. There were plenty of Rexall products to be seen right here: corn plasters, enema bags, mysterious-looking trusses for old people.

“And it’s air-conditioned,” Lasko added. “All twelve cars.”

Now *that* was something. Nothing in Winnemucca was air-conditioned, not even the movie house. Andy had experienced that supernatural coolness only once in his life: when Mama took him on a trip to Reno so she could interview a blackjack girl named Irene. They had dined on chicken salad sandwiches and cherry pie in an air-conditioned coffee shop next door to the casino. He had never forgotten the sensation, that instantaneous release from the blast furnace of summer.

“Do you have to get tickets?” he asked Lasko.

“Not if you’re a Rexallite.”

“What’s a Rexallite?”

“*He’s* a Rexallite,” Mr. Yee piped up from over at the pharmacy counter. “You talk nice to him, I bet he’ll pull some strings.”

Lasko laughed. “He’s a Rexallite, too. And you don’t have to talk to nobody.”

But I want to, thought Andy. I want you to pull strings for me. I want you to take care of everything.

“When is it coming?” he asked. “I mean she.” Trains had a gender, apparently, so Andy thought it best to follow Lasko’s lead.

“We ain’t got the schedule yet, but I could let you know. I could show you.”

Andy knew better than to give him the phone number for the Blue Moon. Mama had always been clear about that. It interfered with business, she said. “Maybe at school,” he said. “I sit two rows behind you in Geography.”

“I know,” said Lasko. “You brought in that book one day.”

Andy nodded, exhilarated by the knowledge that he’d been remembered. “*Richard Halliburton’s Book of Marvels.*”

“With the pictures of the new bridge in San Francisco.”

“Yep. That’s the one.” Andy almost never said yep, but he knew how boys were supposed to talk to each other, especially boys like this one.

Lasko, scrubbing a glass with a brush, looked over at Andy. His nose was indelicate, broken-looking, his eyelashes so long and luxuriant they might have been painted on, like Robert Taylor's on the cover of *Screenland* magazine.

"Could I look at that sometime?" asked Lasko.

"Uh . . . what?"

"The book."

"Oh . . . You bet. . . . I could loan it to you, even."

"I liked those pictures," said Lasko. "And the ones with the Panama Canal."

"Yeah, me too. Pretty nifty."

Nifty. Something else he never said.

"I could bring it by tomorrow," he added, barely able to breathe.

Lasko shook his head. "Sundays I help my mama out."

"At the Martin Hotel? I could bring it to you there."

"Okay . . . sure. Swell." Lasko's dark brows furrowed. "How did you know where she works?"

Andy panicked for a moment, then shrugged. "Everybody knows where she works. Her roast lamb is world-famous." This was laying it on thick, but it was the best he could manage under the circumstances. "World-famous lamb" was actually painted on the side of the Martin Hotel, so it seemed a safe enough choice. And it was better than telling the truth, that Lasko had been under polite surveillance ever since Andy had seen him dancing in the park in those sweaty pirate pants.

Lasko nodded, acknowledging the fame of his mother's lamb. "Come after dinner," he said. "We can eat something in the kitchen."

"Sure. Swell."

An awkward silence followed while Lasko washed spoons. Andy wondered if either of them had a clear understanding of what had just been negotiated.

Finally Lasko said, "Scorcher today, huh?"

Andy whistled—*whew*—and tugged on his shirt collar, a gesture that didn't come off nearly as natural—or as manly—as he had planned.

"Want some shaved ice?" Lasko asked. "No charge."

"Sure."

In one practiced movement Lasko yanked a paper cone from a dispenser, slapped it into a chrome holder, and filled it with shaved ice, glancing briefly in the direction of Mr. Yee, who was occupied with his ledger. Then, as if to say *This is our secret*, Lasko pressed a finger to his lips before hitting a tap and squirting cherry syrup into the cone. Andy smiled as the nectar bloomed in the ice like a rose.

He left the Eagle as soon as he had finished the shaved ice. It wouldn't do to hang around. Lasko was popular, and popular boys always knew when other kids were over-eager for their company. Besides he seemed to like Andy (or at least his book), and Andy had just been invited to dinner at the Martin Hotel. Well, sort of invited, if eating in the kitchen counted. The invitation to the train was less clear-cut, since it could have been done to impress Mr. Yee, but an afternoon of air-conditioning with Lasko, whatever the reason, was nothing to sniff at.

By five o'clock Andy was hitchhiking home on Jungo Road. A breeze had rolled down from the mountains, warm and velvety. Andy felt buoyed by nature and a wondrously unthinkable thought: I have a date tomorrow. He may not know it, and he may not even know my name, but I have a date for the first time in my life.

A beat-up Packard pulled over and stopped, so Andy ran to catch up with it. The driver was a skinny bald man in an old brown suit.

"Where you headin', son? Jungo?"

"No. Just a mile or two down the road."

The man squinted at him. "The Blue Moon Lodge?"

Andy hesitated, then uttered the all-important "Yep."

"Ain't you too young for that place?"

No, thought Andy, I'm too old for it.

"You ever been there?" asked the man.

"I live there."

A slow nod. "You're Mona's boy."

"Yes sir."

"Get in."

Andy did as he was told, and the car sped off down the road.

"You're growin' up like a weed," said the man.

"Yes sir," said Andy. "I am."

The Stuff of Home

This house, thought Shawna as she passed through the rose-heaped gate at the crest of Noe Hill, feels like the family seat now. There was a mature garden here, and curling brown shingles, and an air of tatty antiquity that evoked her childhood home at 28 Barbary Lane. Shawna's new home (a crisp bamboo-floored condo near the Greek Orthodox cathedral on Valencia) was handy to her life—well, her *nightlife*, at any rate—but it still felt more like a base camp. Mrs. Madrigal's flat in the Duboce Triangle was no more than a charming last stop on her journey, and Shawna's dad's RV was a journey in itself, hardly the stuff of home if you didn't actually live in it.

But this house, oddly enough, this cluster of “temporary” shacks built for refugees of the 1906 earthquake, felt steeped in permanence. On the nights when she joined Ben and Michael on the sofa for takeout burritos and *Boardwalk Empire*, the lights in the valley below seemed designed to twinkle for all eternity. They had made it that way, the two of them, with their reverence for domestic detail.

Including, of course, this dog, this big Muppet of a Labradoodle galumphing toward her down the garden path. As usual, when she was wearing a flowy skirt, he made her feel merry and girlish, like Heidi coming home from the hills. Right up to the moment he stuck his big Muppet nose between her legs.

“Stop that, Roman!” Michael was yelling from the front door.

“Please,” she said. “I can use the attention.” (Not true. That particular part had received plenty of attention the night before, and she was pretty sure Roman already had the scoop on that.) “He's the one I'm worried

about,” she added. “One day he’ll get his nose stuck on my vajazzling, and it won’t be pretty.”

“Be stern with him,” said Michael. “Push him away. He took classes to learn not to do that.”

“I remember,” she said. “Labial aversion therapy.”

Michael kissed her on the cheek as she reached the front porch. “Not just for that. He’s an equal opportunity sniffer.”

“Hey, I can dig it.” She found herself sounding strangely retro whenever she was around Michael. It wasn’t something he actually required of her, so it was possible she just liked doing it. Maybe, in fact, that was what having a “gay uncle” was all about for her: to take the sting out of having missed the 1970s.

“I was half expecting a fashion show,” he said, leading the way into the house.

“Why?”

“I dunno. You mentioned Burning Man on the phone. I thought maybe you were gonna model an outfit.”

She could see why he’d think that. Their living room looked like backstage at Fashion Week. There were bolts of fabric everywhere, a veritable planetarium of EL wire on the table, some fuzzy shit on the floor like shrapnel from a lime-green bomb.

“Actually,” she said, “I haven’t started on my outfit.”

Michael just shrugged. “You don’t need to, do you? You’ve already got a closet full of costumes.”

She loved that he knew that. That he had actually *seen* the whorish snarl of scarves on the back of the door. Not to mention the mysteries within: the tutus and bustiers, the baseball uniforms, the Catholic schoolgirl fetish wear. He knew her as well as anyone, this dude in the white mustache and untucked Pendleton.

“It’s all Ben’s doing,” said Michael, looking around the room. “You’d think sewing had just become another event in the decathlon.”

She smiled—partially because that was funny, and partially because she had just pictured Ben, tanned and gleaming and yoga-sculpted, running out of the waves to grab a seat behind a sewing machine.

“That is so cool,” she said. “Is there anything he can’t do?”

Michael widened his eyes at her. “Guess not.”

There was a brief squirmy silence between them. She had not meant the question as a leading one, and he almost certainly hadn't taken it that way, but she was still uncomfortable. She scrambled, tellingly, to back away from the subject.

"Dad's new Facebook bride is awesome," she said.

"Isn't she? At least she used to be. I'm glad to hear she still is."

"So down-to-earth, you know. A real *broad*."

"You know they called her 'The World's Most Beautiful Fat Woman'?"

"Mmm. I checked her out on YouTube."

"She really was a knockout." He chuckled suddenly at a surfacing memory. "Brian told me he had already jerked off to her before we met her up at the river."

"What?"

"Am I oversharing, little one?"

"Of course not! Where? On the Internet?"

He rolled his eyes with a sigh. "A picture. In a book. It was something we had back then. A bunch of pages you could turn." He flopped on the sofa like a flung-aside teddy bear, then motioned for her to follow suit. "Is she still hot?"

She took a seat, curling her legs under her ass. "Would I fuck her, you mean?"

"No, I did not mean that."

"Well, I would—I mean, I *wouldn't*, of course, but I would . . . if I met her at a Litquake party, say, and she asked me out for a drink or something."

He arched an eyebrow. "My, aren't we getting specific!"

Shawna shrugged. "She liked my book. She said so when I met her. I was just putting it into a believable context."

He smiled. "Everybody liked that book."

She reached over and patted his denimed knee. "Thanks for tweeting about it, by the way."

"Sure. I meant it. I couldn't put it down."

"Still . . . thanks for spreading the word."

"To all seventy-six of my followers. You don't need my help, sweetie. I just saw your picture in *USA Fucking Today*."

Oh God, that picture. And even worse, that dress: a short high-waisted number intended as a friendly nod to Lena Dunham in *Girls*. Huge mistake.

The end result had been more like Little Lulu. Note to self: dress like self.

“Actually,” she said, curling up on the sofa, “I’ll be glad to *stop* being everywhere for a while.”

“Burning Man,” he said without much enthusiasm. “Why is that not part of being everywhere?”

“No cell phones. No cars. No airplanes. No schedules.” The litany was already lulling her. “It’s the opposite of a book tour.”

“I guess so,” he murmured. “How about sofas?”

“What?”

“Do they have sofas?”

She chuckled. “They do, actually. Lots of them. In the strangest places.”

“Good. I have a feeling I’m gonna need ’em.”

She was relieved to see the rueful twinkle in his eye. He was starting to get with the program. It was vital to her agenda that Michael feel fully connected to this grand adventure. “That should be your *playa* name,” she said. “Sofa Daddy!”

Michael groaned. “Do we really have to have *playa* names?”

“No . . . but it’s fun, Uncle Grumpy. Being someone else for a while. Flying our freak flag. No one I know takes it too seriously.”

“What’s yours, then?”

“My *playa* name?” Oh shit, he *would* ask that. On her last Burn she had dubbed herself Loosey Goosey while slinging Cosmos at Celestial Bodies, but that would *not* work for an insemination. She needed something grounded and classic, something she could conceivably—so to speak—share with her child someday.

“I haven’t decided yet,” she told Michael.

He scrunched up his brow with sober professorial interest. She remembered him using that expression when she was seven years old and brought him riotous finger paintings from the Presidio Hill School. It proved that he cared.

“What do you want the name to convey?” he asked.

And there was her opening.

She shrugged. “The theme of Burning Man, I guess. Fertility 2.0.”

“What’s that mean? 2.0?”

“I know—right? Confusing as all fuck. They had one before, apparently. This is the second one.”

“So—just Fertility, then.”

“Yes.”

He mused briefly. “Tillie T.”

She rolled her eyes. “Cute. But that’s a waitress in a diner.”

“Okay, then . . . Fecundity.”

“*Fecundity?*” She swatted him with a throw pillow. “That makes me sound like a swamp!”

“Are you pregnant?” he asked, instantly scuttling their game.

She shook her head. “I wanna be, though. You know that.”

He nodded with a beneficent smile. She had suggested as much a month or so earlier when the royalties started coming in from the book, when she could finally lay a claim to adult responsibility. Michael had told her he wanted no part of raising a kid, but he wouldn’t mind having one nearby. He wouldn’t mind that at all.

“And the clock is sort of ticking, you know.”

“C’mon. Twenty-nine is not old.”

She shook her head. “I meant Anna. I want it to happen while she’s still with us.” She avoided Michael’s eyes by fidgeting with her skirt. “I dreamed last night that we were at Barbary Lane. Only it looked like it was when I was little, before those dot-commers made it look like a five-star B and B. But it was now present-day . . . because you and Ben were there . . . and Anna was there, too, but she looked really young and . . . you know . . . fresh . . . younger than I can remember even. And she was touching my belly. And when I woke up, I knew it was time to get pregnant.”

Michael smiled sleepily.

“The thing is,” she added, “I want it to happen at Burning Man.”

The smile curdled noticeably. He was obviously thrown, but trying not to show it. “Well . . . I’m sure you’ll find plenty of takers.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Oh, Michael, not *that* way.”

“Oh, you mean . . .” Mysteriously, he pressed his fingers to his thumb as if he were operating the mouth of a hand puppet.

“What the hell is that?”

“Turkey baster.”

“Oh, right . . . exactly. Bingo.”

The relief bloomed on his face. “Thank God. I was picturing some grotesque variation on speed dating. With me and Ben in the tent next

door.”

She chuckled.

“You know it’s an eight-hour drive, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well . . . that stuff doesn’t travel very well. You’ll need one of those super coolers—”

“Michael—”

“Oh . . . right. You have a supplier *there*.”

She nodded. “A possible one. A sweet guy from my Conscious Dance workshop. He has no interest in being a father, thank god, but he’s totally fine with . . . you know, giving it up for me. I’ve checked him out. No schizophrenic parents or anything. Clean and sober even. He’s got a hammock over at Chakralicious—”

“I have no idea what that is, Shawna.”

“Just another camp. Not far from ours. Sharon, this friend who works at Zynga, has offered to be the runner.”

“The cum runner.”

It was less of a question than a not-so-funny joke, but she confirmed it with a nod. “He’s a decent guy, but I don’t feel close enough to him to . . . you know, have him in the tent while it’s happening.” It sounded odd to put that into words, but it was exactly what she meant. It was important to be clear from here on out.

“So Sharon is gonna—”

“—run it, yeah . . . from Chakralicious.”

Michael took that in for a moment. “You know,” he said, “if you were a guy, you’d know it’s not all that easy to jerk off in a hammock.”

She laughed. “I’ll leave it to him to figure that out. Assuming, of course —” She cut herself off.

“Assuming what?”

Another excruciating silence. “The thing is . . .” She realized that this was the second time she had said *The Thing Is* in the last minute. She was not the sort of girl who touched her throat and said *The Thing Is*. As a rule, she said just what she wanted without batting her eyes in supplication.

“—you and Ben are my family.”

“I know that, sweetie.”

“I mean, Dad too, of course . . . but now that he and Wren are settling in New Mexico—”

“They are?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

Michael shook his head, frowning. “I guess he was waiting until he saw me in person.”

“But . . . *anyway* . . . Caleb will be perfectly fine for this—”

“Caleb?”

“The guy from Chakralicious.”

“Oh—right.”

“—but you would have been my first choice.”

“Your first choice for . . .” It took him a moment, but he got it. “Oh, Shawna, honey . . .”

“Am I weirding you out?”

“Just a little, yeah.” His flashing stoplight of a face confirmed this.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted you to know that . . . I would have been thrilled for my baby to have something of you. Something of your sweetness and wit and your . . . huge capacity for love. I know it can’t happen, since you’re HIV-positive, but I want you to know that I would have asked you, everything else being equal. I would have, Michael, in a fucking heartbeat. So there—I said it. Shoot me.”

For a moment she couldn’t tell if he was deeply touched or just grossed out. Then, when he reached for her hand, she saw the tears shellacking his cheek.

“No one’s gonna shoot you, honey.”

“But shut up, right?”

“Yes, please. Immediately.”

“It’s not like we’re related.”

“But it is, sorta.” He quickly swiped at his cheek. “It *is* sorta like that. Even if I weren’t positive, it wouldn’t be appropriate. We’re different generations.”

She shrugged. “You and Ben are different generations.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“David Crosby did it for Melissa Etheridge, and he was like a hundred and eight.”

He gave her a crooked smile as he squeezed her hand. “Believe me, the invitation means infinitely more than the dance.”

She squeezed back. “Good. That makes me feel better.” She exhaled. “It depressed me for a while, you know. Knowing it wasn’t possible.”

“Oh, frevvinsakes.”

“I know, right? But then I saw how silly I was being. Fuck HIV. And fuck some guy I barely know from Chakralicious. We’re family, so this baby should be about us. All of us. And it still can be, Michael! About you and Ben even!”

Michael’s mouth was agape. “How can it be about that?”

“Okay,” she said, her heart struggling in her chest like a small bird stuck in a chimney. “This is what I called about. I thought you and I should talk first.”

His face revealed that they were finally on the same page, though it might have been an obituary page, or a notice of imminent nuclear annihilation.

“Do you think Ben would be up for it?” she asked.

8

The Art Car

“Do you think she’ll be up for it?” Jake asked the visitors.

They were standing in a derelict warehouse in Emoryville, a place chosen for its wide-open spaces and ready access to the freeway. Jake’s upstairs neighbors, Selina and Marguerite—both transfolk—had just arrived on a trans-bay BART train from San Francisco. Kinda funny, thought Jake, since Trans Bay was the name of his camp in Black Rock City, but Selina and Marguerite were way too ladylike for a Burn.

They were here to see if the art car passed muster.

“It does look comfy,” said Marguerite, craning her neck, “but how on earth would you get her all the way up there?” A math teacher at the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, she was prone to asking questions. And since she was as short and waddly as a pigeon, practically everything she encountered in life struck her as too-high-up.

Jake was prepared. “There’s a detachable ramp, see? We can roll her up there, if we have to. And once she’s in place—wa-la!—all she has to do is sit there and watch the world go by!”

Marguerite frowned. “But, surely, when it’s out on the highway . . .”

Selina Khan, a tall and deeply practical Canadian who advised people about their investments, shot a weary glance at her flatmate. “You don’t seriously think this thing is going out on the highway, do you?”

“Well . . .” Marguerite screwed her face into a pout. “It has wheels, Selina. It looks very strong to me . . . with all that metal and . . . welding.”

Jake tried to soothe Marguerite’s feelings. “A natural mistake. It is a vehicle . . . technically. It’s already registered in the Mutant Vehicles Parade.”

“It’s a giant tricycle,” Selina said flatly. “So what do you do between here and the desert? Disassemble it or something?”

“There ya go!” Jake fired his forefinger at Selina as if she had just picked the right answer on *Millionaire*. He knew he had to placate both of them if this was ever going to happen. As members of Anna’s caregiver circle, these ladies had a serious say in the matter. “We’re packing the parts onto a flatbed truck,” he said, “and reassembling it on the playa. Anna won’t even see it until we’re there.”

“She won’t have to pedal it, will she?” Marguerite again, with her questions.

“Nope. These three pods are the only ones that have pedals.”

Selina grabbed one of the pods and shook it, apparently testing its sturdiness. “And three people—just pedaling—can make this thing move?”

Stop calling it a thing, thought Jake. This is my baby—the Monarch. It took nine whole months to make, in fact, so have some respect.

“Want a demonstration?” He tried to say it without defiance, but wasn’t sure that he’d succeeded. “It’s really simple.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Selina.

Three of the other guys from Trans Bay, including Jake’s boyfriend Amos, were huddled in a circle on the other side of the room, possibly smoking weed. Jake weighed the pros and cons of summoning them, then stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Yo, bitches! Magic Time.” Within seconds they had all come running, scrambling into their pods like firemen mounting a hook-and-ladder.

“Oh my,” said Marguerite, pressing her hand to her chest as soon as the art car began to rumble across the concrete floor. “Should we get out of the way?”

“You’re fine,” said Jake. “They’ve got it under control.”

A section of plastic tubing fell off Amos’s pod and clattered noisily to the floor, making Marguerite jump back several feet.

“That’s just decorative,” Jake hastened to explain. “We’re not finished with that part yet. The hardscape is totally solid.”

“It’s quite something,” murmured Marguerite, obviously trying to say something supportive. “It’s like an old-timey carousel.”

Selina arched an eyebrow at her. “Pray tell, Marguerite. How is it like an old-timey carousel?”

“Well, it goes up and down as much as it goes around and around.”

“It’s not supposed to go around and around. It’s supposed to transport her from one place to another.”

“You know what I mean, Selina. There’s all this wonderful . . . movement, in all directions. It’s extraordinary, Jake. A real accomplishment.”

Jake felt himself blush with pride. He was tempted to show them how the wings worked, but the silk panels had yet to be installed, so the superstructure would still be visible. Without the softscape in place it would come off more like a pterodactyl than a monarch butterfly. He showed them Amos’s sketch instead.

“This is how it’ll look,” he said, offering the blueprint to Selina. “It’s all about—you know—transformation.”

“What’s that writing on the front?” asked Selina.

Marguerite tilted her reading glasses and read aloud: “ ‘Anna Madrigal—World’s Oldest Transgender Activist.’ ”

“That’s lovely,” she said.

“Really?” grumbled Selina. “What if it said, ‘Marguerite McGillicuddy—World’s Oldest Math Teacher.’ Would you want to ride around town in that?”

Marguerite cocked her head in silent concession to Selina, then turned back to Jake. “You might want to go with something like . . . ‘Transgender Pioneer Anna Madrigal.’ ”

“Sure,” he said. “Cool. Fine.” At this point there was everything to gain by compromise. He was just glad they had moved away from safety issues and onto more mundane considerations. It was starting to feel like a done deal. He signaled for the guys to come down, since they were following this exchange too intently.

“Does she know about this?” asked Marguerite.

“Not yet,” he said.

“Why not?” asked Selina.

Jake explained that first he had to be sure he could create something worthy of Anna’s iconic stature in the LGBT community. He wanted every last piece in place, he said, before unveiling the finished product. And naturally that meant the support and approval of Selina and Marguerite, Anna’s most trusted confidantes in the community and, needless to say,

icons in their own right. He had his tongue so far up their asses, it was a wonder he could talk at all.

“How do you know she would even do it?” asked Selina.

Jake shrugged. “We’re honoring her. Don’t people *like* to go places where they’re being honored?”

“The Hyatt Regency, maybe. Not Black Dog City.”

“Rock,” said Jake.

“What?”

“Black *Rock* City. It’s named for the desert.”

“It’s in a desert?”

Jake shrugged. “An alkali flat, actually.”

Marguerite gazed hopefully at Jake. “Is that better than a desert?”

Jake decided not to answer that directly. “I’m gonna rent an SUV with AC. We can come late and leave early and . . . you know, totally avoid the crowds. We’ll have a great time, I’ll be with her every minute, she’ll feel the love . . . we’ll have a photo op and get the hell out of Dodge the next day. Easy peasy Japanesy.”

It was just a stupid expression his mom used all the time back in Tulsa, but it tumbled out of him as if he’d coined the phrase himself. Selina made a face like he’d just spilled a glass of Two-Buck Chuck on her nice white couch.

“What?” he said. “You’re Korean. Gimme a break.” He looked to Marguerite for support. “Doesn’t this seem cool to you?”

Marguerite took her time answering, probably because she had to keep peace in the flat. She and Selina were not a *couple* couple, but they had shared that space for years, so they squabbled about everything in private. Jake had lived there with them, in fact, until he escaped downstairs into the low-stress Eden of Anna’s flat.

“It *does* seem very cool,” Marguerite replied. “But there are other considerations. Cool isn’t always enough, Jake.”

Oh great, he thought, now the good cop was turning on him. “Why are you making me sound like some sort of flake? I may not be as old as you two—”

“*Easy*,” warned Selina.

“—but I am middle-aged, and—”

“You are *not* middle-aged,” gasped Marguerite, sounding like a maiden aunt who suddenly wondered where the time had gone.

“I will be,” said Jake. “In a few years.”

Selina gripped Marguerite’s arm in an act of sisterly consolation. “It’s so unfair, isn’t it? Age is so much kinder to the rougher sex.”

Marguerite wrenched her arm free and returned to the subject, addressing Jake in an even tone: “I know how much you want to celebrate Anna’s life, and I think that’s just beautiful—but she’s very frail now. No one knows that better than you, Jake. There are blinding dust storms at this place and cruel, debilitating heat—”

“It’s not that bad,” said Jake.

“Yes, it is. I’ve been on YouTube. Don’t bullshit me, Jake.”

The Clint Eastwood approach was not typical of Marguerite, so it knocked Jake back for a moment. He imagined her unleashing that tone on her students at the Harvey Milk Academy, having judiciously saved it for just the right moment.

“And here’s what you must know,” Marguerite went on. “If you ask Anna to do this, she will do it. There’s no doubt about that. She will say yes, because she won’t want to disappoint you. We know what she’s like—all three of us—and it’s why we love her like we do. So here’s what you have to ask yourself, Jake—”

Do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?

She didn’t say that, of course, but it’s what she meant. Did he want to take sole responsibility if Anna died for an avoidable reason? The answer was no fucking way, which was why he’d hoped for a different response from the Ladies Upstairs, and why he felt, at this very moment, both pissed off and relieved.

What had he been thinking? It had been almost eight years—eight years!—since he and Marguerite and Selina sat by Anna’s bedside after she suffered that stroke. She had been in a coma, and they had not expected her to come back.

“The good news,” said Selina, with uncharacteristic chirpiness, “is that none of this”—she made a sweeping gesture at the art car—“has to go to waste. You can still go to Burning Rock with your friends. It can still be a lovely tribute to Anna. You can ride up there on the top and—I don’t know . . . carry a big picture of her.”

Marguerite's face lit up. "I can give you that shot of her in the garden."

Jake shrugged. "Sure."

"And then," said Selina, building steam, "you can tape the whole thing and share it with her when you get home. Think how much she would love that!"

Jake felt something akin to mourning as he stared down at his battle-scarred work boots. He had not planned on giving Anna a tape; he had planned on giving her an Adventure, like Richard Halliburton himself, swimming the Panama Canal or crossing the Alps on an elephant. Then, in a flash of insight, he remembered Anna's scorn for the way Halliburton had died: lost at sea in a typhoon on some hokey-ass Chinese junk. "He was just being *vivid*" was how she had put it, and the same could be said of Jake's pedal-driven butterfly if it were to collide, say, with a blissed-out biker in a K-hole or a giant fire-belching mechanical octopus.

He was still young enough to take that chance for himself, but too old, he realized, to take it for Anna. That sucked. It really did.

He was glad about one thing: that he had told no one but Amos and the other people at Trans Bay about his dream of taking Anna to Burning Man. If he had blabbed to Michael or Ben or Shawna—all of whom were going—the postmortem would have been endless. They would have felt the need to commiserate, even if they'd always secretly thought it was a stupid idea. And Jake would have been obliged to trot out his reasoning (stupid as it might have been) for the umpteenth time. This way, at least, the dream could evaporate without further scrutiny or justification.

Jake felt for sure that Michael would bring up Burning Man when they met at a gardening job that afternoon. Burning Man was only six days away. But Michael was strangely silent, almost sullen, as they pruned the big podocarp hedge at a house on Belmont. Ever the greenie, Michael habitually shunned the use of gas power for hedge-clipping, but today his fierce little handmade snips seemed less about ecology than horticultural torture—death by a thousand cuts.

Something was clearly bugging him.

"Sorry I was late, boss," Jake offered at last. (They'd been partners in this business for years now, but Jake kept the term out of simple affection, and because there was something inherently male, he believed, about one

guy calling another guy “boss.”) “I had some friends I had to see in the East Bay.”

“Please,” said Michael. “You work a helluva lot harder than I do.”

Jake shrugged. “You’re older.”

“And one of these days I’m not gonna show up at all.”

“I know.”

They had discussed Michael’s retirement on several occasions, and you could easily read it between the lines of every grunt Michael uttered while going about his work. He was several years past sixty now, with a bum shoulder, terrible allergies, and neuropathy brought on by his HIV meds. He could not do this forever.

“I’m telling you,” said Jake. “You should start selling your weed to the clubs. That shit is kick-ass. Amos and I got so fucked up at the Schmekel concert.”

“Okay . . . I give up . . . Schmekel?”

“All-transman, all-Jewish band. Sort of punk, folky, satirical—you know.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Yeah, except that Amos is a Jew, and loves all that cultural Let My People Go shit almost as much as he loves transmen.”

“So?”

“So . . . there’s a hot guy in the band . . . he’s got this Jason Biggsy nerdy horn-rimmed thing going, and Amos is, like, practically coming on his pecs—like he can’t wait to take him home to Mama and eat shiksa balls at Passover.”

Michael smiled. “Matzoh.”

“What?”

“Matzoh balls. Shiksas are gentile girls.”

“See? Totally fucked already. Jewish trumps everything. Even not having a dick.”

Michael laughed and stopped snipping for a moment. “And this guy in the band is from here?”

“No. Brooklyn.”

“Amos adores you, you idiot.”

Jake sort of knew that, but verification was appreciated. Having endured three shitty relationships with bio guys, he had all but thrown in the towel

over penises. There was plenty of butch out there, after all, and no shortage of toys. A guy could always do without if it meant not having to deal with fucked-up fetishists or bored married gay dudes looking for a three-time thrill. But when he saw Amos Karpel on Buck Angel Dating, he decided (on the strength of his kind dark eyes and sleekly muscled arms and a genius quote from Patti Smith) not to hold his dick against him.

They had been dating for three months. Not long enough for Jake to have expectations of anything permanent, but long enough to worry about whether he was hip and smart and, yes, Jewish enough for Amos.

Oklahoma dragged along behind him like a ball and chain.

When Jake came home that night, Anna was in the parlor eating delivery Thai with Brian and his new wife. Jake had met Wren several days earlier and had liked her—he had told Brian as much—but tonight he felt like hitting the sack with Amos on the cell. He was glad that Anna had company, though. It would make this easier.

“By the way,” he said as casually as possible, sitting down on the arm of Anna’s chair, “I’ll be away for a few days, so Selina has offered to sleep over while I’m gone. Hope that’s gonna be okay?”

“Of course, dear. But Selina won’t be necessary.”

Jake touched her back lightly, feeling the sharp parenthesis of her shoulder blade beneath the smooth satin of her kimono. “She really doesn’t mind,” he told her. “I think she sort of misses you, in fact.”

“It’s not that, dear. I just won’t be here.”

“Oh.”

“Brian and Wren are absconding with me.”

Jake slapped a smile on his face and turned to Brian. “No shit? Where to?” Despite his best effort, he could already feel the jealousy burning in his cheeks.

Brian looked uncomfortable. “Just a little joy ride in the buggy.”

Wren glanced at her husband, then back at Anna.

“To Winnemucca,” Anna said at last, almost as if it were a confession.

Curlicues

A customer at the Blue Moon had left behind a fancy leather valise that, after a decent interval, Margaret gave to Andy. He kept it in his room, knowing that its sophisticated air would have invited ridicule at school. He used it to store treasures (a Barlow knife, some arrowheads, a large ivory brooch he had once told Mama was part of his “pirate costume”). Andy loved that valise—loved the buttery French sound of it: my *valise*—so he despaired at the thought that one day some big-city hotshot might return for another Dambuilder’s Delight with Margaret and, in a moment of clarity, remember exactly where he’d left his most prized possession.

The valise was the perfect size for *Richard Halliburton’s Book of Marvels*. Andy would have felt foolish walking into the Martin Hotel with that bruiser of a book under his arm, and a paper bag would have made him look like an Okie, but the valise, he thought, was just the ticket. It looked sporty in his hand as he gave himself a once-over in the closet-door mirror. He had broken out his best slacks and a sky-blue gingham shirt with cowboy stitching on the pockets. Feeling a sting in his nostrils, he wondered if he might have slapped on too much bay rum.

Mama settled that issue down in the driveway.

“Lord, son, you smell like a cathouse!”

Mortified, he touched his tainted cheek. Mama had made that joke with him more than once—not out of meanness, he reckoned, but because it showed she wasn’t ashamed of the life she was leading. “Should I go wash my face?” he asked.

“Nah. You’re fine. It’ll die down by the time you get to town.”

He opened the door of the truck and climbed onto the running board. “You look right spiffy, son.” She was beaming up at him, happy as a lark

because he had lied to her—well, sort of lied to her—about why he needed the truck. He had told her he was meeting friends for supper at the Martin (friends plural, since only one would have aroused suspicion), and she had asked if “that nice Watson girl” would be among them. His answer had been a shrug and a rogue’s smile, but that had been enough for Mama. The mere *hope* of Gloria Watson was worthy of transportation.

Once he was behind the wheel, she barked instructions: “Don’t drive ’er too fast. The hubcaps come off when you hit the potholes. And don’t let the sheriff see you, for pity’s sake. And park her around back, so folks can’t see it, or they’ll think I’m pickin’ up a pussyhound at the train station. You don’t need that kinda talk.”

He knew all that already.

“And don’t kiss ’er till it’s time to say good night.”

She wasn’t talking about the truck anymore. “C’mon, Mama.”

“Otherwise she’ll think you think she’s loose.” She slapped the side of the truck as if it were a poky horse being released into a corral. “Go on now. Git!”

A dusty pink twilight had settled over Winnemucca by the time Andy arrived at the Martin. He had parked near Pioneer Park and crossed the sluggish river on foot, leaving plenty of room between him and the telltale truck. He had enjoyed the walk: the blue-shadowed evening, the pendulum swing of the valise (as devil-may-care as Fred Astaire himself), though he refrained from swinging it when anyone was looking. Swinging a valise was probably just as bad as twirling.

Eight or ten people had gathered on the porch of the hotel. Some of them were waiting to be seated. Others, beer bottles in hand, had abandoned their meals to watch a long, rusty necklace of boxcars clattering through town. It was part of the nightly show at the Martin. Andy recognized several valued customers of the Blue Moon, but he knew from experience not to greet them. Not in town. Not with their wives around. He had learned that lesson—and how—when he was only seven.

Inside the dining room, the two common tables were riotous with chiming silverware and chatter—gossip about everything and nothing: fly strike, the church supper, Mr. Hoover’s gold speculation in Jungo. Andy stood against the pressed-tin wall, the valise held tight against his leg,

waiting for a glimpse of the Basque boy. The servers were both girls tonight: a tall, horsey redhead from Sparks and Lasko's sister Hegazti, who overcame her crippling name with an uncanny gift for balancing huge platters of food on both slabs of her substantial arms. The all-but-edible aroma of crusty lamb and roast potatoes reminded Andy that an actual supper lay ahead.

In his fever of preparation he'd almost forgotten about that.

A shiny cream-painted door swooped open and produced Lasko like a magic trick. He'd obviously been washing dishes, since his shirtsleeves were scootched up, and his swarthy arm still bore flecks of soapsuds, like sea foam on a rock. He acknowledged Andy with a wink and lopsided grin, motioning for him to enter. Andy squeezed through the crowded room, suddenly feeling like a privileged character, even though, of course, he was just being admitted to a kitchen.

"You sellin' Bibles or something?" Lasko encircled Andy's shoulder with his arm, buddy-buddy as can be, like a ballplayer leading another one off the field.

Andy didn't understand. "Why?"

"That," said Lasko, nodding toward the valise.

"Oh . . . that's the book."

"What book?"

"The *Book of Marvels*. The one I showed in class?"

"Oh yeah . . . sure thing."

"You said you wanted to borrow it."

Lasko finally caught his drift. "Yup, sure did. Thanks, Andy."

This was a moment both marvelous and confounding. Lasko had spoken Andy's name for the very first time, and he'd done so as if they'd known each other forever. But now the Halliburton book seemed like little more than a prop, a handy excuse for their meeting. What was going on here? Andy tried not to read anything into it; tried and failed completely. His heart had a way of prancing ahead of him.

"Sit down," said Lasko. "I'll get us some grub." He pointed beyond the sink to a scarred green card table and a couple of metal folding chairs. It was already set for dinner. "It's better there. The old man don't like company for supper."

Andy wasn't sure what this meant until Lasko's eyes led him to a larger table, where Lasko's father sat sucking on a gravy-coated rib. He looked something like Lasko, but thicker of frame and darker-skinned, the only *mexicano* in this swarming *basco* beehive. He did not once look up from his glistening pile of bones, even when he muttered "No mas" at his daughter as she staggered through the kitchen with her platter-juggling act. The man struck Andy as sullen, dangerously unhappy.

"He don't mind if we're here," said Lasko, sensing Andy's concern.

"You sure? Cuz I don't mind if—"

"He can go to blazes," Lasko muttered under his breath. "I work two jobs. I can have friends. You want ribs or lamb?"

"Uh . . . lamb, please." It was "world-famous," after all. "Is your mother cooking tonight?"

"Nah, she's at St. Paul's polishing candlesticks. She does it every month. Creamed spinach and bread rolls?"

"You bet."

Lasko rose and conveyed the order to the redheaded girl as she filled a platter by the stove. There was something about the way he murmured into her ear, touching her arm ever so slightly, that made Andy wonder about them.

"Is she your girlfriend?" he asked as soon as the girl had left them alone with their massive dinners.

Lasko made a face. "Why would you think that?"

"I dunno. You were so nice to her."

Lasko stabbed a stub of roast potato with his fork. "You get a lot more food that way." He winked at Andy and proceeded to chew vigorously. "I wanna show you something when we're done, but you can't make a big hoo-ha, okay? Just act natural in front of customers. I don't wanna rile the old man."

That was all the incentive Andy needed. The nature of his challenge remained vague, however, until they had polished off their plates and headed back into the boisterous dining room, where Lasko stood next to the hat hooks and cast his eyes suggestively toward the wall. It was an exaggerated gesture that anyone watching would surely have noticed. He would make a terrible spy, Andy thought.

"What?" he whispered. "The hats?"

“The wall, ignoramus.”

The wall was a yellowish green dulled by years of grease, the same pressed tin that covered all four walls of the dining room. The pattern was the standard swirl of flowers and flourishes, all but erased in places by layers of paint. Nothing about the wall struck Andy as remotely worthy of making a big hoo-ha.

“It looks old,” he offered, trying to make a stab at it.

“Pseesnpukrs,” Lasko mumbled. (Or at least that’s what Andy heard.)

“What?”

“*Pseesnpukrs.*”

“Sorry, I still don’t—”

“C’mon!” Lasko grabbed his tweed cap off a hook and headed for the door. Andy followed him into the silky night, still toting the valise and feeling chastened and simple-minded. Lasko blazed a trail along the railroad tracks, where a weedy swath of gravel and broken glass finally gave him the privacy he needed.

“Pussies and peckers,” he blurted. “Didn’t you see them? They’re everywhere.”

“On the wall?”

“Yessiree! All them little curlicues are nothin’ but sex organs. Some of ’em are pussies and peckers at the same time. Whatchacallit? . . . hermapherdike.”

Andy frowned. “Not on purpose, though? The pattern, I mean?”

“Hell yeah, buddy. Fifty years ago that place was a whorehouse!”

The thundering silence that followed had to be filled by someone, so Lasko obligingly did it. “No offense. I just think it’s a hoot that my mama and Father Garamendi and that snooty Mrs. Snow all sit there and never even see it.”

“Yeah,” said Andy without much conviction, since he himself had sat there and never even seen it.

“You have to be lookin’ for it,” Lasko added generously.

“Guess so,” said Andy.

Lasko picked up a piece of gravel and chucked it down the tracks. “I don’t care about your mama or the Blue Moon or nothin’. No matter what anybody says. I figure we got more in common than most people in this

hellhole. Hell, you're a lot smarter'n I am. You memorize poetry and shit. You read books."

I not only read them, thought Andy, I carry them down the railroad tracks in a heavy valise for no earthly reason in the dead of night.

Lasko was picking up speed now, building toward something with every breath. "Shake a leg, Andy! Here's a place we can sit." The place was a rough cube of concrete, set back from the tracks and prickly with rusty metal. It was barely big enough to hold them both, but they managed somehow, feet dangling and trousers touching perilously. Lasko fished a match and a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

"Want one?"

Andy shook his head. He had tried that once and found it unpleasant.

"It's a Camel."

"That's okay."

Lasko struck the match against the concrete, lit the cigarette, and took a long drag, staring into space with shiny black marble eyes. Down the railroad tracks red and green lights were blinking like lost pieces of Christmas.

"How does that poem go, anyway?"

There was only one poem that Andy knew by heart: Tennyson's "Lotos-Eaters." He had recited a portion of it in Mrs. Peacock's English class to a sea of listless faces, unaware that he had caught the fancy of anyone, much less Lasko.

"I don't know it all," he said.

"Just do what you know." The tip of Lasko's cigarette went bright orange in anticipation.

Andy thought a bit. "Um . . . okay." He straightened his spine for the recitation. "Eating the lotos day by day, to watch the crisping ripples on the beach, and tender curving lines of creamy spray, to lend our hearts and spirits wholly to the influence of mild-minded melancholy, to muse and brood and live again in memory with those old faces of our infancy."

He stopped, embarrassed, unsure how much he could remember. Lasko was still gazing ahead, his face wreathed in smoke. His leg was still pressed against Andy's, warm as a radiator and just as solid. "Have you ever been to a beach?"

Andy said he had never even seen an ocean.

“Me neither. They have beaches in Frisco, but it’s too cold to swim in the ocean, so they all go to this big swimming pool. Indoors with big glass windows and stuffed bears and a penny arcade. They have a big waterwheel up above it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like at a sawmill, you know?” Lasko turned to Andy, his face so close that Andy could feel the breeze of his tobaccoey breath. “Only you jump into it, and it tumbles you round and round and dumps you into the pool, one on top of the other.”

“Wow,” murmured Andy, ostensibly about the mechanism, but mostly at the thought of being tumbled round and round and dumped on top of Lasko. “Really nifty,” he added, impersonating the hale-fellow tone of the Hardy Boys.

“I figured you for the adventurous type,” said Lasko. “Soon as you brought that book to school.” He looked down at the valise, waiting at their feet like a puppy craving attention. “I can pull this off, Andy, but I need a buddy to help me.”

“Pull what off?”

“My escape to Frisco.”

Andy envisioned that rattletrap truck bouncing over the Sierra, dropping hubcaps at every treacherous turn. “That’s a long trip, Lasko. My mama won’t let me drive that far.”

“We ain’t talkin’ to your mama.” He shook Andy’s knee conspiratorially. “Or my mama neither. Besides, you don’t need to drive me. I just need you to help me for one day. Right here in town. Easy as pie. *You can be my alibi.*”

Those five words, with their presumption of intimacy, seduced Andy so completely that they might have been imprinted on a candy Valentine heart.

“Do you have your own car?” he asked.

“I got more than that,” said Lasko. “I got a dozen cars, and they’re all air-conditioned.”

Andy gaped at him. “The Rexall Train?”

“See?” said Lasko. “Look how smart you are!”

Sneaker Wave

“Wrong Diana,” said Ben as a smile exposed the gap between his teeth.

They were standing on the brink of the continent at the new visitor center next to the Cliff House. Michael had already admired its low profile, the clever way its timber and raw concrete echoed the ruins of the Sutro Baths down below. The swimming pavilion had once been as glassy-eyed and cavernous as a Paris railway station, but a suspicious fire had gutted it in 1966 (over a decade before Michael’s arrival in San Francisco) leaving only this footprint of a temple, a sea-stained Mondrian. Harold and Maude had famously frolicked among these ruins, and Michael himself had often reflected on them, back in the day, when exploring the nearby pagan shrubbery.

This was their Sunday expedition. Couples could get stuck in ruts if they weren’t diligent, so Michael and Ben had resolved to seek out a different venue every week. In recent months that had meant the Point Isabel dog park, the Disney Family Museum in the Presidio, the Kabuki Theater (for movies with margaritas and turkey salad sandwiches), and the Hunky Jesus Contest in Dolores Park (a repeat, admittedly from last year, though there was always something original). Michael had heard raves from the poppers guy at Does Your Father Know about a statue of Diana recently erected at the new visitor center, so he had proposed a visit, never once considering that it might have been Diana the Huntress and not the Princess of Wales who had been depicted. Ben had found the mix-up amusing.

“Why would you even think it was *that* Diana?”

There was no way out of this but a pokerfaced gag. “Because she is loved by our people.”

“Gay people?”

“Yes,” he replied with exaggerated dignity. “And anyone who might enjoy her company while gazing upon the Pacific.”

The truth was that people barely talked about the sad Spencer girl anymore. She was yesterday’s tabloid, a one-off episode on the History Channel. There was a new princess now, a pretty non-troublesome Disney brunette who seemed to have been special-ordered by the palace for smooth operation. Michael felt old and silly.

Ben, sweetly, let him off the hook with a sudden change of subject. “So why Winnemucca?”

Michael grinned. “That should be the slogan for tourists.”

“And they’re driving there in Brian’s Winnebago?”

“That’s what he said.” Michael turned up the collar of his peacoat against the tiger bite of a blue summer day. “They’re spending the first night in Tahoe. Part of it’s about spending time with Wren. The rest of it—whothefuckknows?”

“Have you ever been to Winnemucca?”

“No, as a matter of fact. Have you?”

“Once. A long time ago. It’s a strip of motels and casinos and fast food places. It can’t come close to whatever Anna remembers.”

“I know,” said Michael. “I’ve Googled it. They still have brothels, but—oh, it’s tragic, you don’t wanna know. It’s not about tourism for Anna, I can tell you that. Brian said she said something about ‘unfinished business.’”

“When was she last there?”

“Nineteen thirty-six, as near as I can figure.”

Ben whistled.

“I know,” said Michael. “What could possibly be unfinished? Everybody must be dead. The Blue Moon is long gone.”

“But Mona went there, of course. Back in the seventies.”

It was wonderful to hear Ben speak of Mona as if he had actually known her. Michael’s old roommate at Barbary Lane had died of cancer in the Cotswolds well before Ben entered Michael’s life, but she had already become a substantial deposit in Ben’s memory bank. Michael had heard him regale strangers at parties about Mona at the nude beach, Mona going ballistic at the ad agency, Mona chasing women on the island of Lesbos, as if Ben himself had been witness to those moments. It was one of the joys of

being married to him. The line between the past and the present, as Edie Beale once called it, was penetrable when Ben was around to listen.

"She not only *went* to the whorehouse," Michael said, giving it the drama it deserved, "she worked as a fucking receptionist. She was the reason Anna saw her mother again. Mona, the last of the big-time hippies, this unregenerate gypsy, was the glue of the three generations. That ended up being her purpose—you know."

"I do know," said Ben.

Michael sighed and gazed at the gulls loitering above the ruins, their cries as random and unmelodic as creaky hinges. "You know all my stories now," he said. "It's bound to get tedious."

"I wish I'd known *her*," Ben replied, sidestepping the question so adroitly that it offered the gentlest imaginable honest answer.

"So we're all heading to Nevada this week," said Michael, ticking them off on his fingers. "Us . . . Jake and Amos . . . Brian and Wren . . . Anna. Can you believe that? It's kinda weird. It's like *Happy Days* goes to Hawaii."

Ben smiled. "Winnemucca's a far cry from Burning Man."

Michael mumbled in the affirmative.

"They're in the same part of the state, but you get to them on completely different highways from different directions. There's a wilderness between them." A crazed pearly light in Ben's eyes suggested nothing so much as a forest ranger who has just been mobilized for a wildfire. He was so ready for all this hardship. "I found the tent," he said. "It was in the garden house under a piece of plywood. Pretty good shape, looks like. And there's a big sturdy tarp we can use as a windbreak."

"That's good," Michael said.

"Is Shawna taken care of?"

He felt the tiniest twitch below his right eye. "In what way?"

"You know—tentwise."

Michael tried to sound nonchalant. "I doubt we'll see her again once we're there. She's bunking in three camps, near as I can make out. And access to a daybed at the Ashram Galactica—whatever that is—god help us all. Has she called you yet?"

"No," said Ben.

“She’s going to. But don’t tell her I told you, because she wanted to tell you first, but I don’t want you to be put on the spot—and you will be, believe me—because it’s very sweet, it’s just as sweet as it can be, but it’s also very embarrassing and . . . deeply, deeply icky. I just wanted you to be prepared.”

Ben regarded him, slack-mouthed. “What on earth are you—”

“She wants your sperm when we’re at Burning Man.” Michael threw up his hands, relinquishing the concept to the winds. “She wants to get pregnant there. She loves you and admires you and thinks your sperm would be most excellent. She doesn’t expect you to be the father, just the donor. That’s pretty much it, except the spiritual angle, which I’ll leave to her. Oh, yeah, and it’s fine with her if I’m around during the sperm extraction process. In fact, it would be great. Even lovelier.”

Ben made a disbelieving face. “She did not say ‘sperm extraction process.’”

“Not in so many words, but . . . c’mon, honey, this has gotta be creeping you out.”

His husband shrugged. “It’s a little . . . too close for comfort, yeah. I’ll give you that. With all of us in the same tent.”

“Not in the *same tent*! Ugh, no. Is that what you thought? Another tent, for God’s sake. At another camp. With a bicycle ride in between. And her friend Sharon from Zynga. And a big fertility theme party with Tibetan prayer bells and Aimee Mann’s second album while she lies perfectly still for half an hour with legs thrown over her head. Why are we even talking about this?”

“Why you acting so horrified? People do this all the time.”

“You *want* to do this?”

“I didn’t say that. I just can’t figure why you sound like somebody’s Aunt Gladys.”

“Well, exactly—I *am* her Aunt Gladys. You hit the nail on the head. I practically became her second father after Mary Ann left, and it just feels weird to me. I can’t help it. It’s too personal or something. It’s almost like . . . incest.”

The word came out like a rattlesnake’s hiss, prompting a short blond woman standing nearby to turn and glare daggers at them.

“It takes way too much explaining,” Michael told her with a shooing motion. “Look at the scenery, please.”

“In the first place,” said Ben, leaning closer and lowering his voice significantly, “it’s not you she’s asking, it’s me—”

“And it’s a lovely compliment, sweetheart, it really is.”

“In the second place, I’ve never known Shawna as anything but an adult. I’m not related to her either. Neither are you, for that matter. Nobody’s related to anybody here. And Shawna is almost thirty years old. Chillax, Michael.”

“*Chillax*? You don’t say *Chillax*.”

“I’m saying it now. Because you’re acting like you’re twelve and hormonal.”

If only he knew, thought Michael. Sixty-two was a *lot* like twelve and hormonal. Teenagers rage against the end of childhood, old people against the end of everything. Instability is a permanent condition that adapts with the times.

“There’s such a thing as emotional incest,” Michael said, in lieu of exposing his petty fears, the hard truth of what he was feeling. To admit that, here and now, would have been humiliating. Not to mention unattractive.

“It’s not incest,” said Ben. “It’s not even close.”

“It’s Soon-Yi incest.”

“Oh, please.” Ben snorted. “Soon-Yi incest.”

“Well—”

“Woody Allen was *fucking* Soon-Yi. This is a procedure, Michael, nothing more. And again, it’s not *you* she’s asking, it’s me.” Ben seemed to ponder the ramifications of that. “Did you tell her how you feel about this?”

“Of course not. I told her to talk to you.”

“But she knows. You can’t hide shit. You must’ve hurt her feelings.”

“I don’t think that’s true at all.”

“So why hasn’t she called me?”

“I couldn’t tell you that. I’m trying to stay out of this.”

“Oh, and a great job you’re doing, too.”

It wasn’t like Ben to clock him so snidely. Michael was on the verge of defending himself when he saw the never-disguisable hurt in his husband’s eyes. And he knew instantly that he was not the person who had put it there.

“Oh, listen, honey, the only reason she came to me first was that she and I have known each other for so long—”

“—and you’re the official keeper of my sperm.”

Michael regarded him, hand on hip, incredulous-ghetto-chick style. “Shut up, okay? The only reason she came to me first is that she wanted me to know that she would have asked me first if I hadn’t been HIV-positive.”

Ben took that in for a moment. “Before me, you mean?”

“Well, not before you, but . . . in addition to.”

“You said first. You said she would have asked you first.”

Michael blinked into the wind. “She was being *nice*, Ben. Trying not to hurt my feelings. She wanted this to be about all of us, and she felt awkward about it. Understandably, if you ask me. She’s already got another guy lined up, and she knows we have no interest in babies, but she wanted to run it past us anyway. Just in case.”

“And she couldn’t have said all that to me?”

“I suppose she could have. But she didn’t. She confided in me the way she always has, and I’ve fucked it up in my usual asshole codependent way.”

Ben gave him a heavy-lidded look that said, *No argument here*. “She can read you like a book, Michael. She must know how you feel about it, so that’s the end of that. My guess is, she’s hurt and mortified. I’m not expecting a phone call.”

Michael hesitated then asked: “Do you want one?”

“I do now, yes.”

“Really?” Michael drew back like he’d been slapped.

“Yes. So I can at least tell her I was honored to be asked, and I’m not as repelled by the invitation as you seem to be.”

“Fine,” said Michael. “Do you want me to call her?”

“No. Just leave it alone. If she doesn’t call, I’ll talk to her when we’re on the road.”

“Not when we’re all in the car?”

“No. When you’re out taking a leak or something.”

“No problem. Do you feel like breakfast?”

“Louis’?” Ben had cast his eyes at the newly reopened diner on the highway.

“Pancakes,” said Michael. “Pancakes and applewood-smoked bacon.”

And thus the storm appeared to pass.

Ben had cabinetry to finish for a client in Pacific Heights, so after breakfast he dropped Michael at the house and left for his workshop on Norfolk Street. Their Sunday excursion felt truncated to Michael, though not in a perilous way. They were nice to each other during the drive, and they both knew that a check from a client would be useful right now. It made sense for Ben to finish this job before they left for Burning Man. The mortgage on their mountain property in Pinyon City (now on the market at a savagely reduced price) was about to balloon like a hemorrhoid. Foreclosure would soon be upon them without serious groveling to the bank.

Social security would help, eventually, but that was still three years away, and Ben, though legally Michael's husband in California, would not be eligible for the check after Michael died. Assuming, of course, that social security was even around in three years, that Congress hadn't gutted the system to bail out a bank. It was easy enough to rail against the 1 percent, but the truth was that Michael and Ben had become their willing handmaidens in these New Hard Times. Their clients had once come from all over—from people like them, artists and office workers—but now only the rich could afford tended gardens and custom furniture. It was the 1 percent or nobody.

There was comfort in knowing that most of their friends were in the same leaky boat. They were counting their blessings, waiting for a sneaker wave that would take them to shore. They had moved to the North Bay or the Excelsior. They had left Whole Foods for Trader Joe's or Costco. They had rationed out their restaurant meals and curtailed most impulses involving clothes or condiments. Their cars had gone third-world, because they had let go of such vanity, and because it was depressing to send a many-times-dented Prius through a carwash.

Ben and Michael had a few well-off friends: executives at Twitter and Google they had met among the poor at Lazy Bear and Litquake; an artisanal chocolatier who had sold his brand to a conglomerate; a handful of doctors and lawyers; DeDe and D'orothea Halcyon-Wilson, with their bottomless family money; Michael's old friend Mary Ann Singleton, who had divorced well in the east and come west again to find her bohemianism in Woodside with a reconstituted maiden name. But Ben and Michael saw

less of these people now—there was no denying that. Something lurked in the chasm between their incomes, something less about envy or snobbery than deep embarrassment from both directions. It was just easier to stay away.

Of all Michael's close friends, Brian seemed the least concerned about poverty. He was the oldest of the bunch and had lived in an RV for the past eight years, but he was newly married to a woman he had known for two weeks in the late 1980s, and their bliss seemed simple and complete. They were moving to a small adobe house in New Mexico that had belonged to Wren's late aunt. Their plan was to make lamps and key chains out of recycled license plates. There was a market for that in Madrid, Wren explained, which was not pronounced like the city in Spain.

"The accent is on the Mad," she added with a boisterous laugh. She was sprawled on the sofa at Michael and Ben's like an eighteenth-century courtesan, steely-tressed now but as lush and striking at fifty as she had been half a lifetime earlier. "It was a coal mining town, nearly a ghost town, actually, until the hippies came along. It's a little touristy in the summer, but it's still funky and falling-down in places, and it's beautiful there in the hills. John Travolta made a movie in Madrid a few years back. There wasn't a masseur for miles around who was safe."

Michael and Brian chuckled in unison. Brian was clearly doting on her.

"Seriously," said Wren, "you and Ben should come visit."

"We will," said Michael.

"We'll still have the RV. You can stay there."

"It's a deal." Michael wished Ben would hurry up and get home to meet this still-glamorous witness to his vanished past. The mention of Brian's RV, however, threw him back into the immediate future. "I'm glad you're spending time with Anna," he said. "I'm sure Brian is, too."

"Oh, man," Wren exclaimed, "she is such a fucking joy. We spent the whole morning with her at her flat, getting ready for the trip. I'm just jealous you've had all these years with her. Do you think we're making a mistake, Michael?"

This sudden shift of tone brought a quick glance from Brian.

"We're not making a mistake," he said quietly. "This was your idea, Wren. Don't start getting cold feet."

"She's so frail, though, pumpkin."

“She may be, but this is important to her. It’s obviously on her bucket list, and we’re not gonna let her down. She won’t have to get out of bed if she doesn’t feel like it. We can do this, Wren. We’re probably the only people on earth who can.”

Wren undercut Brian’s melodrama by lifting her hand in a stage whisper to Michael. “Batman here means the Winnebago. We’re offering door-to-door service.”

“To *what*, though?”

“Not a what, a who. Someone named Oliver Sudden.”

“Who the hell is Oliver Sudden?”

It was Brian’s turn to answer. “Apparently he worked at her mother’s brothel.”

“No way. He’d have to be a hundred-and-fucking-five.”

Brian shrugged. “One would think.”

“She’s jerking your chain, Brian.” Michael laughed as the light dawned. “It’s an old vaudeville joke. All of a sudden. Oliver Sudden my heart sings. There’s a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence right now who calls herself Sister Olive O’Sudden.”

“No kidding.” With the cocksure leisure of a cowboy pulling a pistol from his boot, Brian unbuttoned his shirt pocket, produced a square of folded paper, and handed it to Michael. “Wonder how she was able to Google him?”

Michael unwrapped the paper and studied the evidence in Times Roman: Oliver Sudden, 2261 Sandstone Drive, Winnemucca NV 87678.

“Well, what do you know?”

“Not much,” said Brian. “If we’re talking about you.”

Michael ignored the bro-to-bro teasing. The printout was a city roster of some sort, public utilities maybe, a list of names and addresses, the scantiest of online profiles. He handed the paper back to Brian. “Anna Googles?” he said.

“Apparently. When we’re not looking.” A grin rippled across Brian’s face. To Michael he had always looked a little like Jeff Bridges, and even more so now that he was getting old. It allowed you to forgive him many things.

“And c’mon,” Brian added. “Is Anna Madrigal really known for jerking chains?”

Michael had to admit that she wasn't.

Brian threw his hands up, accepting victory before an invisible jury. He had once been a lawyer, and sometimes it showed.

Wren rolled her eyes at Michael, then shook Brian's knee in reprimand. "Don't be insufferable," she told him, but she made it sound like a love song.

Complicated Machinery

Shawna didn't feel like cooking the night before the trip to Burning Man, so she asked Sharon to meet her downstairs at Another Monkey. The place was sort of elegant for a Thai restaurant: Buddhas under pin spots, copper piping as a design element, a unisex restroom with shallow sinks and translucent toilet stalls. Back in days of yore this had been one of those deafening dot-commer places with a one-word name (Revelations or Colander or whatever), but it was less pretentious now. Shawna would sometimes order pad thai at the register and take it home on the elevator. They might have done that tonight, if not for Sharon. Shawna had taken Sharon home once, and Sharon had flown with it, texting about soul mates before Shawna had time to wash the strap-on. Sharon did not need encouragement.

"The grilled beef salad is good," said Shawna. "I've had that several times."

Sharon closed the menu shut with a winsome smile. "Good enough for me, then." She leaned forward on her elbows, brushing aside a vagrant strand of pale brown hair. "I've gotta tell you, Shawn. I am so excited about this."

Shawna hated that Sharon was calling her Shawn now—not because it masculinized her name but because it claimed a lover's right to abbreviation.

"Excited about what? Oh, your first time at Burning Man. That's gotta be big."

"No." Sharon's eyes darted around the room as if she were about to place an order for crack. "The first time I ever helped someone get pregnant. It's like being a midwife or something. Except with a turkey baster instead of forceps."

“A bicycle.”

“What?”

“I need you for the bicycle, Sharon. I’ve got the turkey baster covered.”

“Oh.” Sharon’s face fell. “Who’s doing that?”

“I am.” Shawna gave her a sly but gentle smile. “It’s complicated machinery, but I think I can handle it.”

It took Sharon a moment to recover, but she managed. “Oh . . . well, sure . . . I just assumed since I’d be transporting it—you know . . .” She bludgeoned the rest of that thought by reaching for the Zynga tote bag she’d left on the floor by her chair. “This is for you. I made it myself. I hope you don’t already have one.”

Shawna could feel the burn of Sharon’s expectant gaze as she removed the contents of the bag: a small blue shawl covered with yellow squiggles and circles. At least, that’s what they looked like. She could think of nothing to say.

“It’s a fanny blanket,” said Sharon. “You put it over your fanny while your legs are over your head. You’re less exposed during the impregnation, but . . . you’re still comfortable and it’s . . . you know . . . celebratory.”

“It certainly is. Wow. This is . . . amazing.”

Fuck me, thought Shawna. She thinks we’re having a baby together, so she’s made me a twat cozy. The lesson here was an old one: do not accept favors from lovesick one-night stands if you’re not prepared for them to crank up the U-Haul.

“See?” said Sharon, pointing to the squiggles and circles. “Those are little sperms and eggs.”

“So they are.” Shawna hated herself for joining that asinine Conscious Dance workshop, and for getting so gabby afterward with Sharon. But how could she have known that her unilateral pregnancy plans would get Sharon so hot? Or that Sharon, having already scored a ticket to Burning Man, would soon be inescapable?

Sharon swiped at her hair again. “I know it’s kinda silly.”

“Not at all. It’s a nice thing for a friend to do.”

The f-word was strategic, and it left an excruciating silence between them. Finally Sharon said, “Have you spoken to that guy yet? The furniture maker?”

Shawna decided it would help Sharon to know that everyone gets rejected. And it would certainly help Shawna to unload this humiliation on a nonintimate, someone who wasn't part of her logical family. "I spoke to his husband," she said.

"And?" Sharon gazed at her, all goggle-eyed and earnest—Amanda Seyfried in the Grecian moonlight—as if Shawna had just announced her first belly thump.

"I think I grossed him out."

"You're kidding?"

"No."

"What a dick!"

Don't attack him, thought Shawna, just so you can be on my side. "He's not a dick, Sharon. He's someone I've known all my life. He's like an uncle, only not my dad's brother. I think he's squeamish about his little girl."

Sharon frowned. "It's not like he has to be there. And you're gonna get pregnant one way or the other. That doesn't feel like the real reason to me."

Shawna hated her for saying this, because she was feeling the same thing.

"Anyway," said Sharon, "why not just go directly to the carpenter?"

"Furniture maker. Because I'm sure he's spoken to Michael . . . his husband, and he hasn't called me yet. It's gotta mean he feels the same way. Maybe they both think I'll make a shitty mother and can't bring themselves to tell me."

"I think you're better off with Caleb," said Sharon. "I saw him this morning, and he was so excited about it."

Shawna's stomach knotted. "You know Caleb outside the dance workshop?"

"Sure. He works at Zynga too. In accounting."

"He understands we're not coparenting, right?"

"Absolutely. He says he just wants to give back to the earth. Isn't that a sweet way of putting it? We were coordinating things at Starbucks this morning."

This was bad news, since Shawna had already considered eliminating the bicycle—and thus the middleman—altogether. With the use of a festive partition Caleb could have given back to the earth in Shawna's tent, thereby

removing the need for Sharon, panting heroically over that grotesque taint warmer. Now there were two Zynga geeks, two pawns of a corporate empire, conspiring to play FarmVille in Shawna's uterus. It might have been doable if not for the crazed gleam in Sharon's eye. Unreciprocated love was the deal-breaker here.

There had to be someone other than Caleb. Someone Shawna knew and trusted who was not in cahoots with Sharon.

Stay loose, she told herself. Stay loose, and he will come.

So to speak.

For the rest of dinner, Shawna steered the conversation away from the big insemination. They talked about the practice of gifting, the Burning of Wall Street installation, the fucked-up new ticketing system that had decimated some of the camps and was now demanding online orders so precisely timed and hideously prolonged that you could have been on the line at the fucking DMV. Sharon, of course, was still auditioning for the role of desert wife, offering Shawna the use of her Camel Bak, her daytime goggles, her iridescent green harem pants that would look, she insisted, totally sick on Shawna.

They parted outside the restaurant. Shawna made a show of heading upstairs to her condo (since she'd claimed to have packing to do), but she stayed only long enough to pee and wash her face and grab a drag off a doobie. She needed loud music now, and meaningless laughter, and anyone disinclined to knit things for her pussy. She knew she would occasionally need company on this long slog to single motherhood, but she wanted it to be the right company, for the right reason. And she would not beg anyone, not even family, to be part of the process.

This was her doing, her baby. Her own version of sacred.

Sofuckyouunclefuckeryou'reafuckinunclefucker . . .

Maybe she could get them to play that song at Martuni's.

That might help a lot. That and a couple of appletinis.

She would begin the purification process as soon as she was on the road to Black Rock City. No booze, no weed, no gluten, no molly. Seriously.

But tonight she was throwing a bachelor party for her baby-maker.

Imagining Amos

They had found a good spot at Martuni's (out of the crush but close to the piano), so Jake staked a claim while Amos went for cocktails. The sight of this guy—*his* guy—wriggling through the crowd warmed Jake with an old contentment. He remembered a time when his name was still Janice and he and Dan Strayhorn had dug army foxholes in Dan's backyard in Tulsa. Dan had treated him like a buddy, had *called* him buddy, in fact—no cracks about girls—as they swung pickaxes on a sweltering summer afternoon. The foxholes were more like shallow graves, but they roofed them with planks and dirt and talked to each other for hours, soldier to soldier, each in his own bunker, through a length of buried garden hose. Reduced to a voice in the loamy darkness, Jake could be exactly the boy he was supposed to be.

Amos was that voice through the hose, that trusting headlong tumble into camaraderie. Jake had always been imagining Amos: someone who would hold him close and treat him as the same rough creature without effort or delusion. Amos, by his own admission, had never imagined anyone like Jake, but it didn't matter. He responded to Jake, admired him. "You're a better man than I," he declared one night after sex, and Jake had almost instantly been moved to silence.

"I'm sorry," Amos blurted. "That was lame."

"No, it wasn't."

"Yeah, it was way too gooey Jewy. I work too hard at being a mensch."

"You didn't mean it?"

"No . . . I meant it."

"Then shut up, dude."

Amos laughed and used his T-shirt to mop the pearly splatter off Jake's chest. "It just sounded so self-consciously liberal. I hate that."

“I liked it,” said Jake. “So shut the fuck up.”

That’s how their valentine had read.

It had worked for both of them.

Someone had commandeered the piano to bang out “I’m Yours.” Amos was across the room, holding Manhattans aloft like amber lanterns, but somehow he managed to swap smirks with Jake. The two of them had a running joke about that song, the way Jason Mraz had been every-fucking-where on their first few dates, bouncing out of cars and bars with all that you-done-done-me stuff, all that certainty about love, love, love. You had no choice but to dis it with someone you’d just met, or it would take you down with it. But the very act of dissing it had already made it their song, their reason to catch the other’s eye across a crowded room.

Amos handed him the Manhattan. “I think most of it’s still there.”

Jake took a sip to prove him right. “Thanks, bud.”

Amos pulled his chair closer to Jake’s. “Isn’t that your friend over there? The one who wrote the best-seller?”

“Shawna?”

Sure enough, it was Brian’s daughter, looking more like Zooey Deschanel than ever now that she’d let her bangs grow back. She was sitting with a skinny guy whose hair was a dandelion about to explode. Jake hadn’t seen him for several years, so it took a while to place that long, blank Nordic face—Otto, the street clown/puppeteer that Shawna had gently dumped when he got too serious.

Realizing that Jake had spotted her, Shawna headlamped her eyes and twiddled her fingers at him. “Hang on to our seats,” he told Amos. “I’ll be back.”

He made his way to Shawna and kissed her on the cheek.

“Hey, doll.”

“You remember Otto, right?”

“Sure, hey!”

“Otto, Jake . . . Jake, Otto.” Shawna sounded unusually chipper, hyper almost. “We just bumped into each other. Right here. A few minutes ago. Isn’t that wild?”

It didn’t strike Jake as especially wild, but he left it unchallenged, laying his hand on Otto’s shoulder. “So how’s ol’ Sonny?”

Otto looked confused. “Who?”

“Your puppet.” Jake mimed it with his hands. “The monkey puppet?”

“Oh . . . Sammy.”

“Right, sorry . . . Sammy.”

“He passed on to Nirvana.”

“Wow.” Jake spoke the word quietly, respectfully, seeing a cloudiness in Otto’s eyes that had to be honored. “How does that happen exactly?”

Otto sighed. “I was broke, so I got a job at Trader Joe’s. It was time to get off the street. I couldn’t stand to think of Sammy cooped up in the box all the time, so I took him to the Burn last year and . . . we said our good-byes at the temple burn. It was awesome, but—I gotta tell you, man . . . really, really hard.”

Jake found this tale far more disturbing than he’d expected. “I guess you couldn’t have sold him, huh? Or given him away?”

“You don’t do that to your child,” said Otto.

You don’t incinerate him either, thought Jake, unless you’re some old dude in the Bible. And there was something especially disturbing about sacrificing an inanimate object that depended on you for its life.

You just don’t do that, dude. You don’t take a dog back to the pound because you don’t want to feed it anymore.

Shawna was fidgeting with her cocktail napkin, Jake noticed. Something was distracting her, and he was pretty sure it wasn’t premeditated puppet-cide. “So,” she said in an odd little voice, “we’re all heading for the playa this year, looks like.”

Jake turned to Otto. “You too, huh?”

“He’s on the temple crew,” said Shawna. “It’s gonna be ah-ma-zing this year. All laser-cut with computers. Can you believe this?” She made a gesture that encompassed the three of them. “The world is so fucking small!”

“Cool. Look . . . I better get back to Amos. Just wanted to say hi.”

In truth, he just wanted to get away from Shawna’s weird energy. She was sounding like a Heather or something. You’d think he’d just caught her with an embarrassing online hookup, or a secret married lover, instead of an old fuck buddy she had long ago sent packing. It wasn’t like her. It made no sense at all.

It unsettled him to find Anna gone when they got back to the flat. It really shouldn't have, of course, since they had watched her leave, blowing kisses and waving from the window of Brian's Winnebago like a homecoming queen on a float. But a couple of stiff drinks and a dark, empty house had set Jake to thinking: How would a lasting absence feel? How could he even prepare for that?

He wanted her back. He wanted her back here right now, lighting candles all over the flat—*real* candles with real flames and tons of wax dripping everywhere—whatever the fuck she needed. He felt an icy panic scrape through his chest like a glacier, a dread so complete that Amos detected it and offered distraction.

"I think somebody wants a word with you."

Jake looked down at the tiny black cat encircling his leg.

"Hey, Notch baby—yeah, I know, where the hell is she?" He lifted the cat gently, letting her drape lifelessly over his hand. (That was the way Notch preferred to travel, having lived too long on the mean streets of the city to submit to anything on her back.) He brought her into the kitchen and set her down next to her food. Marguerite and Selina had obviously been here, since the bowl was already filled with Notch's crunchy senior kitty food. She sniffed it once and politely declined.

"Do you want me to stay over?" asked Amos.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

"I dunno. A whole week of Trans Bay ahead of us. Stinky porta potties. Loud music. You might want some down time."

"You mean *you* might like some down time."

Amos shook his head. "Nope. Not what I said."

"Then stay. I'm fine with it. It's easier with the truck, anyway. They only have to make one stop." And I won't be alone here tonight, he thought. I won't be alone here for the first time maybe ever.

The truck had been loaded that afternoon in Emoryville. The Monarch had been dismantled piece by piece and strapped into place on the flatbed, a shapeless scrap pile of poles and pedals and painted canvas that would, he hoped to God, find its way to wholeness again in the desert. He was feeling as wingless and inert as his creation. So much of his focus had been on Anna (getting her there, keeping her safe, thrilling her with his magical ride) that he had lost a sense of purpose.

“It’ll be a triumph,” Amos told him that night in bed.

“Oh, yeah?” said Jake, settling into the crook of his arm.

“It’s magnificent . . . and it grew out of you and her. Nothing has changed in that respect. And she won’t miss anything but the hardship. It’ll even have its own Facebook page. Felicia is going to film the fuck out of it.” Amos chuckled at this unintentional clustering of *f*’s and repeated the phrase slowly, like an exercise in enunciation. “Felicia is going to Film the Fuck out of it.”

Jake couldn’t handle being silly right now. “The bitch of it is: Anna’s going to the desert anyway. She could just as easily die in that RV as in the art car.”

“Nobody’s dying,” said Amos. “Let it go.”

Jake turned and looked at him. “What was that you gave her today? When they were leaving.”

“Just a card.”

“A card?”

“A bon voyage card. Telling her not to worry. That I’d keep an eye on you.”

Jake was silent for a moment. “Really? You did that?”

“She worries about you too.”

Another silence.

“I bought us something fun for the playa,” Amos said.

“What?”

“Magic underwear.”

“*Mormon* magic underwear?”

“Why not? You said it made you hot. Ever since you saw Patrick What’s-His-Name wear them in *Angels in America*.”

Was that how he’d explained it? He had said so much during the gabfest of their first date, from their initial sniff-out at Hot Cookie to their exhausted predawn entanglement at Amos’s apartment in SoMa. It had all been true, if incomplete. He had wanted to share with Amos but not overshare, so he couldn’t remember exactly what was on the record. He decided to shift the discussion away from his libido.

“How would you even get a pair of Mormon underwear?”

“You mean how would Amos Karpel get a pair of Mormon underwear?”

“No. Anybody. You can’t just buy it, can you? You have to have a note from your pastor or something.”

“Orrrr . . .” Amos tiptoed his fingers across the raven tat on Jake’s bicep. “You could go to a website in China that makes a brilliant imitation.”

“No!”

“Oh yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. A fine blend of polyester and cotton, and baggy in all the right places. It’s already packed in my duffel bag.”

“You’re nuts,” Jake said with a dismissive chuckle, though this was close to being the sweetest thing he’d ever heard.

“So what’s the fantasy here?” asked Amos. “I’m . . . what? A young Mormon missionary? An unusually *swarthy* and well-nosed young Mormon missionary who’s come to the city to take away your marriage rights? You sense right away that I’m deeply repressed, so the moment our eyes meet at the front door—”

“Pier 39.”

“He’s canvassing at Pier 39?”

“It’s his day off. He’s looking at the sea lions. He’s wearing a red jacket and jeans.”

A sly grin crept over Amos’s face. “This is an awfully specific fantasy.”

The game was obviously over. “It wasn’t that much of a fantasy,” he said ruefully. “More like a fucking train wreck in the end.”

“But you saw the magic underwear?” Amos didn’t seem especially bothered that this scenario had its roots in real life.

“Oh yeah,” said Jake. “Four or five times. We did this therapy thing.”

“You’re losing me here, bud.”

“He had a shrink back in Snowflake—”

“Utah?”

“Arizona. The shrink did this reparative therapy where he held him in his arms like a dad would do. Comfort him and call him son and shit. But with their clothes on. Said it would cure queerness. Fill some deep-seated need.”

“I’m sure it did. For the shrink.”

“Word.”

“So you did this with him, huh? In his magic underwear.”

“Yep.”

“Right here?”

“Sometimes.”

“While he was campaigning for Prop 8?”

“Pretty low, right? Sleeping with the enemy.”

“Well . . . cuddling with the enemy.”

“That’s even worse. The enemy should not be cuddled.”

Amos laughed. “Or coddled.” He slipped his hand between Jake’s legs and pulled him closer. He smelled of Manhattans and hair oil and a good day’s work. His fingers found Jake’s clit and rolled it idly, speculatively, like a pebble he’d just discovered on the beach. “So now you have this thing for magic underwear.”

“Sort of. It could be nice to see them come off some time.”

“Damn. They never did?”

“That was the deal. Neither one of us wanted to get naked. He didn’t want to go all the way with a fag, and I didn’t want him to see my *vagine*.”

“He doesn’t know what he was missing,” said Amos.

Abyssinia

The beauty of Lasko's escape plan was that most of it could be discussed openly, even at Eagle Drugs, where Mr. Yee mistook the gleam in Lasko's eye for fierce company loyalty. When Lasko crowed to Andy about the twelve cars on the Rexall Train or the hordes expected in Winnemucca or the efficiency with which this blue-and-white python would slither through all forty-eight states, there was no reason for suspicion. For Mr. Yee, and the rest of the town, the Rexall Train was just a one-day extravaganza, a vision that would evaporate as soon as it left the station.

And so it would for Andy, since Lasko had not requested company on his exodus to Frisco. Andy's job was to board the train an hour before departure and tour the exhibits with Lasko, leaving with the crowd once Lasko had found a good hiding place. He might not even need a hiding place. He'd be wearing a white shirt, he said, with the Rexall emblem stitched on the pocket. He could easily be mistaken for someone official, someone who belonged there. And if anyone asked where he was (Mr. Yee, for instance), Andy was to say that Lasko had gone home sick.

Going home sick from the Rexall Train struck Andy as funny, since each of the cars, according to Lasko, was named for a different Rexall product line intended to improve health or well-being. There was Firstaid (gauze and bandages), Bisma-Rex (antacid powder), Cara Nome (cosmetics), and Kantleek (hot water bottles and enema bags). The last two cars were Joan Manning (chocolates), where the staff would be sleeping, and Puretest (Epsom salts and talcum powder), the private observation car of Mr. Louis Liggett Himself, the grand poobah of United Drugs.

Andy had a cartoonish image of Mr. Louis Liggett Himself throwing Lasko off the train by the scruff of his neck. He saw angry steam coming

out of the old man's ears and Lasko flailing like they do in the movies. Then he saw a bloody, gravelly death. He shared this vision with Lasko one afternoon as they walked home from school.

"You don't get it," said Lasko. "I ain't no Okie, and this ain't no boxcar. This is the Rexall Train, and I'm a Rexallite. They don't wanna make a stink while they're sellin' these many fine products. It's a palace in there. They've got a four-piece orchestra. They've got an exhibit that shows how maraschino cherries are made."

Andy was kind of curious about the cherries, having experienced them in Reno at the same time he experienced air-conditioning, but they weren't relevant to this discussion. "Lasko, look, the other Rexallites will know each other. They'll know that you don't belong there as soon as the train starts moving."

"No, they won't," said Lasko, sounding testier than Andy had ever heard him. "Half the people on the train will be Pullman employees. I could be one of them. I could easily be that. Everybody will think I'm with somebody else."

Not if you're wearing a Rexall shirt, thought Andy.

Lasko walked for a while in sulky silence, kicking the rubble along the roadside. "I'm pretty convincing, you know. I can talk people into things."

Andy did know that. He thought of Lasko's hand on his shoulder that day at the drugstore. He thought of the complimentary squirt of cherry syrup and the fancy supper at the Martin Hotel and, later that night, the Mediterranean heat of Lasko's leg against his own. Lasko's offer of friendship had been mildly suspect from the beginning, but Andy, after consideration, had decided that he didn't care. For better or worse, Lasko was adventure in a red sash and baggy pants—Richard Halliburton on a shoestring. This train caper might be goofy as all get-out, but it was harmless enough, and Andy's role as henchman was so peripheral as to seem unnecessary.

So why had Lasko enlisted his aid? Did he just want a witness to his grand scheme, someone to tell people where he had gone and how he had pulled it off? Was it easier to entrust this secret to the bookworm whose mother ran the brothel than to one of his buddies on the baseball team? Or was there something else on Lasko's mind, a secret longing he could never bring himself to name? No matter, thought Andy. Even if Lasko *had* asked

him to run away with him on the train, hide with him god-knows-where until they reached San Francisco, even if he had lured Andy with talk of a magic heathen city, of a giant waterwheel in a giant swimming pool, Andy would have had to say no. He could never do that to Margaret or Mama.

Lasko stopped walking and looked directly at Andy. The slanting afternoon light made his embarrassment golden.

He's not used to begging. That face gets him everything.

"Are you in on this?" asked Lasko.

"I'm in. Just tell me what to do."

"Swell." Lasko thrust out his hand to be shaken.

Andy shook it. "Are you coming back?"

"What's it to you?" asked Lasko.

Andy shrugged and started walking again. "I think that's a natural question for one friend to ask another."

"You don't say," said Lasko.

It was one of those dumb things boys come up with when they don't know what to say, some meaningless tough-guy expression they've learned on the radio.

You don't say, wise guy.

But that was just the sound of it. If Andy had been looking at Lasko, if he had seen those dark eyes dance or the slightest curl of his lip, he might have known what to make of it. He might have even seen it as flirtatious, something overblown and sassy that landed, a little clumsily, halfway between Cary Grant and Mae West.

You don't say.

They walked in silence for a while.

"Are you enjoying the book?" Andy asked at last.

"What?"

"The *Book of Marvels*."

"Oh . . . yeah . . . it's good."

Andy scuffed a cloud of dust at him. "It's not a book report, Lasko. I'm not your teacher. I don't care if you've read it. I know you've got a lot on your mind."

"Like what?" Lasko looked genuinely curious.

"Well . . . packing, for one."

"*Packing?*" He made a noise like spitting soda.

Andy found himself grinning. “Well, I guess, under the circumstances . . .”

“You don’t pack for an escape.”

“No, I guess not.”

Lasko hooted and bounced around Andy like a prizefighter, his fists pumping slowly and steadily, teasing but never quite touching the parts of Andy’s body they purported to be demolishing. “Pack for an escape!” He sounded pirate-crazy at that moment, scornful too, but it was hard not to smile in the midst of that whirlwind.

When he finally stopped, Andy said, “You must’ve made plans for the other end.”

“The other end of what?”

“The line, Lasko. Do you know anyone in San Francisco? Are you just gonna get off the train and take a streetcar to the swimming pool?”

“I might. I could.”

“You have to have a plan, Lasko.”

“No, I don’t. Not after this. I don’t have to have a plan in the world.”

They parted in town, not far from Lasko’s house. At least, Lasko said it wasn’t far from his house, leading Andy to think that he might be ashamed of the place. Either that or he was just ashamed of Andy, the madam’s boy he’d brought to the restaurant kitchen without so much as a how-do-you-do from his Mexican father.

Lasko raised his hand in a parting salute, walking backward for a moment as he uttered for the third or fourth time a snappy new farewell that Andy liked to think had been invented just for him. “Abyssinia!”

“Abyssinia,” echoed Andy.

He watched Lasko as he headed down the street past Kossol’s Korner. He would walk for while, strutting almost, then stop to spar with someone who wasn’t there, some mighty invisible foe that had to be vanquished. Even from a distance his long, balletic shadow was comical and melancholy and completely magnificent.

It was coming on dusk when Andy got back to the Blue Moon. Several unfamiliar cars were parked out front, one of which almost certainly belonged to a customer, since Delphine was in her cabinette yelling “Peckerwood cocksucker!” at the top of her lungs. Mama would not be

happy about that. She expected the girls to be ladylike. If there was yelling to be done, Mama would be the one to do it.

Andy stopped outside Delphine's cabinette to make sure she was all right. His answer came when the customer, a stumpy, baldheaded, beet-red man, stumbled out the screen door with his shoes and spats and most of his dusty blue serge suit piled in his arms. Upon seeing Andy, he shook his head in contempt, as if to say, *These women!*, presuming sympathy from a member of his own gender.

"Fucking Cajun cunt," he muttered, then stumbled toward his car, arms still brimming with clothes, stopping only to pee on the cactus painted on Violet's cabinette. They despise women, thought Andy. Why do they even bother?

Margaret, slouched against the porch swing, caught the world-weary look on Andy's face as he headed into the house. "Elegant here tonight, ain't it?"

Andy rolled his eyes. "How do they get so plastered so early?"

Margaret followed him into the house so eagerly that he assumed she'd been waiting for him. "Delphine was raisin' more Cain than he was."

"I know. I heard it." Andy's eyes shot nervously to the corner of the parlor, where Mama's big desk was piled so high with ledgers and *Collier's* magazines that you could never tell for sure if she was there.

"It's okay," said Margaret. "She's in town. And what she don't know won't hurt her."

Andy agreed. At this point Mama needed only the slightest excuse to boot Delphine out of her cabinette. Delphine had lately been giving Mama lip, so Mama had been on the warpath. Margaret had never cared much for Delphine, she said, but she didn't want to see her working the arcade either, doing it on the cheap for Chinamen behind the bowling alley. So that meant keeping Mama in the dark about Delphine's tantrums with customers. Margaret liked keeping Mama in the dark.

"It's in her blood, you know. She can't help it."

For a moment, Andy thought she was talking about Mama.

"They get this rage in 'em down in the swamps."

"Oh . . . Delphine." Andy smiled. He loved how Margaret summed things up so neatly, the way she kept things uncomplicated for herself.

“That’s a new slip,” he said, noticing it for the first time. It was powder blue rayon, lace-trimmed.

Margaret ducked her head as if she’d been complimented at a prom.

“Special customer?” asked Andy.

“Just some Stanford boys. They’ve been here before, but they’ve got a new chum with ’em.” Margaret plumped the white-blond tresses she had piled on her head for the evening. “Girl’s gotta keep up her reputation.” The brave vamp tone didn’t come naturally to her, so she abandoned it immediately. “They’re nice boys, though. Polite as can be on the phone. Listen, lamb, can we chew the fat for a sec?”

“Sure,” said Andy, already puzzled.

“In your room, I mean?”

With Mama in town, it was hard to imagine what could possibly require privacy. What crisis would have to wait until the girls were out of earshot? The dress, thought Andy. The chiffon shame in his closet. At Margaret’s insistence, he had never worn it outside his room—and only three times inside—but Mama could easily have found it. She’d been known to snoop around sometimes, and there was no way to lock his door from the outside. On two occasions Andy had come home from school to find the orange-blossomy sweetness of Mama’s perfume, *Je Reviens*, inhabiting his room like an overripe tropical garden. It troubled him more than it should have. It didn’t help, of course, that the name meant “I’m coming back.”

Andy led the way into his room. Margaret followed him closely, a picture of international intrigue as she latched the door behind her.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Are you in trouble, lamb?”

“What?”

“You know you can ask me for money. You don’t have to do this.” She sat on the edge of the bed and patted the spot next to her. Andy sat down reluctantly.

“Why would you think I need money?” he asked. He received an allowance from Mama every week when she doled out the cash to the girls. It was nothing to brag about, but it covered lunch money and sodas and movies and such. He knew plenty of kids at Humboldt High who didn’t even get lunch, much less allowances.

Margaret was studying him with big cow eyes. "It's not like you, lamb. That's what I don't understand. Help me to understand, all right?"

"Margaret—"

"I went into town today to buy me some special emerald-green thread, and I passed the pawnshop on the way out of Hunsucker's." She laid her hand on her chest and sighed, as if the awful truth had just been finally revealed in full.

"And?" he said.

"They had it for sale in the window, Andy." A tear blazed its way through her caky makeup. "I know it's silly. It didn't belong to me in the first place, but it was a nice piece of luggage—real Italian leather—and I wanted you to have it."

The valise, thought Andy. Lasko hocked it.

The emotions jostling within him—confusion, betrayal, shame, guilt—left very little room for the truth. "What do you mean?" he asked, completely poker-faced.

"You know, Andy. That beautiful valise." She pulled a hankie from her slip and blotted her eyes with delicate precision. "I wanted it to be an heirloom from me."

"Ohhhh." Andy made it look like the light had finally dawned. "So that's what happened. I'm so sorry, Margaret. I really am."

"What do you mean?"

"I took it to school last week. I wanted to show it off. I left it by my chair in the lunchroom when . . . you know, I went to stand in line. When I got back, it was gone. I asked everybody around my table, but nobody said they'd seen it."

"You didn't report it to the principal?"

Andy hesitated, scrambling for a way out. "I thought some of the kids were teasing me. I figured I'd get it back in a day or two. I didn't wanna be a snitch. And I didn't wanna disappoint you. I just hoped you'd forget about it . . . eventually."

"Oh, Andy." She looked so relieved that Andy felt even guiltier.

Why am I protecting Lasko? he thought. I'm the one who was cheated.

"We should tell the sheriff. He can find out who hocked it."

"No!"

"Why not?"

“Because . . .” Because what? “Because the valise didn’t belong to us either, Margaret. They’ll just think you stole it from that fancy customer.”

“The sheriff knows me, Andy. He wouldn’t think that.” She looked devastated now, as if her reputation with the law had gone with the valise. “Besides, we don’t have to mention where it came from. We’ll say I bought it for you.”

“But . . . you can’t. Not with that monogram.”

“What monogram? I didn’t see no monogram.”

“It was little. It was on the inside. I thought it was the company at first.”

Lie upon lie in the name of love. Not even love yet, and probably never. Just the highly unlikely and nearly impossible possibility of love.

He knew better, of course. Even then, before it happened, he knew better.

Only Tales

The middle of California scrolled past them in a golden blur, steeped with the shrines of Petco and McDonald's, a landscape like anywhere else in America. Or the world, for that matter. Years ago, when Wren had modeled caftans among the ancient ruins of Delphi, she'd been appalled by the long suburban drive out of Athens. A terrain intended for satyrs had abandoned its soul to Toyota dealerships.

She opened the ice chest and pulled out a sweating bottle. "Kombucha?" she asked, displaying it lengthwise for Mrs. Madrigal as Vanna White might do. "This is lavender, but we also have hibiscus here at the Club Winnebago Sacramento."

"What is it, dear?"

"Oh shit, who knows. It just showed up in the stores. It has enzymes or something—live cultures—living breathing things. Definitely an acquired taste. Kind of floral and moldy at the same time."

The old woman widened her eyes. "How much more floral and moldy do I need to be?"

Wren laughed and twisted the cap. "It's good, though. I was surprised. Stops short of sweet and gets somewhere deeper in your taste buds, if that makes any sense." She took a sip, then held it out to Anna, who took it from her and drank.

As near as Wren could tell, she liked it.

"Good?"

"Mmm. I've always fallen for a good snake oil salesman."

Wren wasn't sure how to take that, but she laughed.

"It's all in the pitch, isn't it? Show me some enthusiasm and I'll believe anything you say."

Wren chuckled. "Did you learn that at the Blue Moon?"

"In the vicinity." Mrs. Madrigal handed the bottle back to Wren with a tight little smile. "I'm afraid that's a taste I won't have sufficient time to acquire."

"Give her a Coke! I think there's one in there!" This was Brian, yelling from the driver's seat. He liked getting lost in what he called "the Zen of the road," but every now and then he'd pipe up, letting them know he was still there.

"No, dear," said Anna. "I'm perfectly fine."

Wren tucked the bottle back into the ice chest. "Would you like to stretch out? The bunk is right there. We've got at least two more hours until Tahoe."

"No, thank you. I'm very comfy. I love watching the world go by. I haven't done it much lately. It's a treat."

"Am I talking too much?"

"Not at all."

"I wanna know about your life," Wren said flatly. "How you . . . made it the way it was supposed to be."

"My reassignment, you mean?"

"In part, yeah. You must've been one of the first?"

"Oh, no. There were people in the thirties. Dr. Hirschfeld in Berlin had several patients, one of whom died after surgery. The one I knew about, of course, was Christine Jorgensen in the early fifties. Everyone knows about her."

Anna was clearly waiting for an acknowledgment that Wren was unable to provide. "Sorry, that was—"

"Before your time. Of course. She'd been George Jorgensen of the Bronx. In the army like me . . . and she went to Denmark for the hormones and surgery. That's how I got the idea, though that was tricky business a decade later. The Danish hated the publicity around Christine, so they banned the procedure. I had to find a doctor on the sly in Copenhagen." Anna rearranged her hands in her lap with imperial dignity. "Christine was very brave. Heroic, really."

"Having the surgery, you mean?"

"No—well, yes, it was still risky—but I meant back home. The whole sideshow, the cheap jokes. All that 'GI Becomes Glamour Girl' nonsense.

She took it with remarkable grace and candor. There were reporters waiting for her at the airport, so she wore sunglasses and a mink and stepped off the plane like a movie star. She owned her truth. It was how she kept the world from hurting her.”

Exactly what I did with fat, thought Wren, recalling her life in the world of Big and Beautiful. Tell the joke on yourself first, and others won’t get the chance.

“She must have felt so impatient with people,” Anna added with a sigh. “Even her doctor didn’t understand who she was. He saw himself as performing a humane act for a homosexual. Castrating him for his own good. And the good of society.”

“What do you mean?”

Anna shrugged. “So he couldn’t act on his unnatural attraction to men.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!”

“That’s the way it was,” said Anna.

“Did you feel like a girl when you were a little boy?”

“Oh yes. Always.”

“And you were attracted to boys?”

“Yes—but probably not in the way that you were.”

“How so?”

The old woman’s eyes moved to the parchment-colored hills as she composed her answer. “I was drawn to them romantically. I felt as if I *belonged* with them romantically, but I knew I had the wrong equipment for it, so . . . it scared the hell out of me—repulsed me, in fact, if they even . . .” Her voice trailed off.

Wren, feeling bold, finished for her. “If they came on to you.”

“Yes. For sex, mind you. Flirting was fine—lovely in fact—as long as it went nowhere, but . . .”

“When push came to shove . . .”

Anna smiled at her. “Yes. Unthinkable. Utterly. I would have felt like someone deformed.”

“Did that happen often?”

“What?”

“A boy coming on to you? Aggressively, I mean.”

“You ladies doing all right back there?” Brian asked, yelling over his shoulder again. Wren wondered how much of their girl talk he had heard,

and if he thought she was overstepping her bounds with Mrs. Madrigal. Then she dismissed the thought as ridiculous. What bounds could you possibly overstep with this amazing person? In her own way, she had long ago stepped off the airplane like a movie star. At ninety-two she surely had no secrets left to tell. Only tales.

“We’re fine, pumpkin,” she told her husband before turning to Anna. “Aren’t we?”

“Of course,” said Anna, looking out the window again.

When they arrived at Tahoe, it was already twilight under the tall trees. While Brian handled the hookup, Wren got Anna settled in a camp chair, so she could look out over a patch of sand at the darkening cobalt glass of the lake. This was one of Brian’s favorite places, and Wren could see why. Camp Richardson was a throwback to the 1920s, a rustic resort with Monopoly-board cabins named after the touring cars that once shuttled tourists between here and Placerville: Chevy, Buick, Pierce-Arrow. But the wondrous machines that had brought people to the wild seemed less so now that there was a perpetual traffic jam encircling the lake.

Wren set up a camp chair next to Anna’s and collapsed into it. Anna turned and smiled at her, then returned her gaze to the lake.

“I’m as old as this place,” she said. “Maybe a little older.”

Wren wasn’t sure how to respond, so they let an easy silence fall.

Finally Anna said, “I’m glad you’re with him.”

“So am I.”

“His first wife wasn’t meant to be married. Some people aren’t, you know. Very sweet, but . . . I knew from the day I met her.” A breeze tousled a wisp of Anna’s hair, so she corrected it. “Brian was always gallivanting around, mind you, but I knew he was heading for this. Always.”

Wren raked her fingers through the cool sand next to her chair. “I was a major gallivanter, too. Maybe that’s why it works so well.”

“Quite possibly.”

Another silence.

“I wish you weren’t going away,” said Anna, adding after a moment, “I wish *I* weren’t.”

Wren reached across and took her hand. Twigs swathed in cool silk.

“Thank you for not contesting that,” said Anna. “It gets tiresome being told you’re immortal.”

Wren chuckled. “I’ll bet.”

“Help me up, dear. Just for a second. While we still have the light.”

Wren helped the old woman to her feet. “Do we have a mission in mind?”

“Oh yes.” Anna pointed a shaky finger at the blue-shadowed beach in front of them. “Just from here to there will be fine.”

Wren took her arm and began to walk. “Wait,” said Anna, holding back, rubbing one Chinese slippered foot against the other in a way that puzzled Wren.

“Goddammit. Help me get them off, would you, dear?”

“Do you have a stone or—”

“I just want them off.”

She wants to go barefoot, thought Wren. “Steady yourself on my shoulder,” she said as she knelt and removed Anna’s slippers one at a time, following up with the socks. Even in the rapidly fading light the seashell-pink varnish on Anna’s toes was unmissable. “Nice color,” said Wren. “I like a girl who paints her toenails.”

“Done it most of my life. Or had it done.”

“Even back at the Blue Moon?”

“Oh yes. My friend Margaret did it. One of the ladies.”

“Who does it now?” Wren began to lead Anna slowly through the sand.

“Who do you think?”

“Jake?”

Anna chuckled. “Helps to keep his lady side alive.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

“Mmm. For all of us, dear. Both sides are necessary.”

“So how did you keep your man side alive?”

Anna stopped walking for a moment to wriggle her toes in the sand. “Ohhh, that feels lovely. The earth knows exactly how to hold us if we just let it.”

Wren wondered if she’d finally asked the wrong question, but Anna eventually replied: “Your husband.”

“Sorry?”

“How I kept my man side alive. He was my buddy at Barbary Lane. We had some fine man-to-man talks. The way men can do sometimes.”

And it made him a better man, thought Wren.

It made him exactly the kind of open, unthreatened, and sexually confident man that she was able to live with.

In this case, for a lifetime. Whatever that means for the two of us.

They ate dinner together—a big paella for three—on the porch of the lakefront restaurant at Camp Richardson. There was sangria too, several pitchers, and a waiter who thought it was cute to call Anna “young lady” with every refill.

“Condescending asshole,” Wren muttered, as soon as he was out of earshot.

Anna took a sip of her sangria. “I don’t mind, dear. He thinks he’s being charming.”

“That’s very gracious of you, but, if he talked to *me* like a six-year-old, I’d personally hand him his nuts on a platter.”

Brian and Anna both laughed. “I doubt Anna would be bothered by ‘young lady,’” said Brian. “She built the word ‘girl’ into her name.”

Wren didn’t have a clue as to what he meant.

“Her name is an anagram,” Brian announced with a note of triumph in his voice. “Anna Madrigal is an anagram for ‘a man and a girl.’”

“No shit?” She looked to the old woman for confirmation.

Anna just shrugged. “The letters do spell that out.”

“She tortured me with it for weeks,” said Brian. “In those days you couldn’t figure it out on a computer.”

Wren fished an orange slice out of her sangria and popped it into her mouth. “So you picked your name because it was an anagram for—”

“Actually, no. The anagram came later. I mean, I realized it later. Everyone’s name is an anagram for something. Almost everyone’s.”

“Large wounds,” said Wren.

“Pardon me, dear?”

“Wren Douglas is an anagram for ‘large wounds.’” She lowered her eyelids at Anna. “Can you imagine how much *that* played hell with a fat teenager?”

They shared a merry moment of bonding until Brian interrupted it. “Wait a minute,” he said to Anna. “You told me you chose your name for the anagram.”

The old woman shook her head slowly. “I told you it *was* an anagram. There’s a big difference.”

Brian’s face turned pouty. “So you were just blowing smoke up my ass.”

Anna smiled dimly. “You may have been inhaling, dear, but I wasn’t blowing.”

That got a snorty laugh from Wren, who filed it away for future use.

Her husband, however, seemed determined to carry through with his indignation. “Okay, then where did Anna Madrigal come from?”

“Winnemucca,” said Anna, as if the answer were patently obvious. “In more ways than one.”

It occurred to Wren, not for the first time, that Mrs. Madrigal enjoyed a good conundrum. Even at this age, with all her cards seemingly on the table, she liked being a woman of mystery. Wren remembered the Google printout in Brian’s shirt pocket and how the old woman had presented it to Brian without explanation.

“Tell me,” said Wren. “Would this have anything to do with Oliver Sudden?”

Anna smiled over the rim of her sangria glass. “If I knew the answer to *that*, my dear, I wouldn’t have asked for a ride.”

Matter Out of Place

It began as a hidden procession on the freeway. The odd car with hieroglyphics of the Man taped on the back window, an RV adorned with clunker bicycles, the occasional flatbed truck, its tarp bulging scrotally with carnival parts. For the first few hours, these encounters were random enough that you could enjoy a secret communion with the other pilgrims in the bland mainstream of traffic.

But once the freeway was gone, and the highway had become a country road, the funnel into Black Rock City narrowed to nothing and a new sort of communion began. They were stopped now, completely, thousands of engines silenced in the midst of a hazy gray desert. One by one people emerged from their metal shells to assess the situation and pee by the roadside. Michael thought of a train stalled on the tracks. Any moment now, the bandits would board them and begin to plunder.

“Let’s get out,” said Ben. “We’re gonna be here for a while.”

With no further urging, Shawna leaped out of the back seat and onto the trailer, where she pointed ecstatically to the horizon. “Omigod, guys, look!”

Ben and Michael followed her onto the lumpy hillock of camping equipment and boxed water bottles, Michael faltering in the process. Ben grabbed his hand and steadied him, an act that was simultaneously endearing and humiliating.

“I’m fine,” said Michael. “Thanks, sweetie.”

Great. Flunking the physical already.

“What are we looking at?” asked Ben.

“Our peeps,” said Shawna.

There, in the distance, the line of traffic made a single glittering brushstroke across the landscape, encircling everything like a noose.

“Shit,” murmured Michael.

Shawn mistook his horror for amazement. “Is that not awesome?” Her own tone suggested someone who’d just beheld a queue of disabled believers at Lourdes.

“And that’s not even the end of the line,” Ben told her. “That’s just the part we can see.”

Michael groaned. “Dare we ask where the beginning is?”

The three of them turned in unison. What they saw, first thing, was a fortyish guy in a sarong making an effusive bow to the sunset from the top of his Cruise America RV. He was also blowing bubbles (a little frenetically, Michael thought), as if to say that his bliss was *on*, motherfuckers, gridlock or no gridlock.

“Woohoo,” he called upon spotting the threesome on the trailer. He wasn’t exactly greeting them, just demonstrating his ability to make that annoying sound.

Michael woohooed back, perhaps ineffectually.

Shawna giggled, gazing up at him. “You need to work on that.” She looked radiant in this light, already halfway to pagan princess. While he, in Bermudas and XL baggy tee, still undoubtedly looked like Granddad at Disneyland.

“I have to build up to it,” he told her. “I can’t just woohoo from a cold start. I’ve never been like that.”

Shawna held onto his arm. “I know, Uncle Mouse.”

He wondered if this old nickname had been summoned for nefarious purposes. They had not discussed the sperm thing (as Michael had come to think of it) since Shawna first broached the topic. He assumed that Ben had spoken with her, bowing out gracefully, but he didn’t know for sure. He hadn’t asked. He wanted Ben to know that he, Michael, could leave the subject alone, keep his nose out of things.

“He’s got the right idea,” said Shawna.

Michael was rattled. “What?”

“The guy in the sarong. We could be here for hours. We have to let go of our traveling mentality and Be Here Now.”

“She’s right,” said Ben, taking Michael’s other arm.

He sighed. “You can’t Be Here Now if you haven’t gotten there yet.”

That would have been a lot funnier if it hadn't become the theme of the day. The line of vehicles stopped and started and stopped again until they finally arrived in Gerlach, a charmingly mutant village that might have been too much like *The Hills Have Eyes* had the locals not been hawking glow sticks to Burners off their front porches. By the time they passed through town, night had fallen, bringing with it a dust storm of Old Testament proportions. Ben, as usual, thrived on the challenge, remaining cool-headed in the face of calamity. While the wipers carved adobe arches on the windshield, he drove with the focus of a tank commander, squinting into the whirlwind that repeatedly erased the taillights ahead of them. Those lights, Michael reminded himself grimly, could well be attached to Mr. Woohoo himself, who, having prematurely snorted huge amounts of K three hours earlier in a porta potty in Nixon, was now on the verge of passing out at the wheel.

"This is a fucking nightmare."

"You're not being helpful," Shawna observed from the back seat.

"You're right." He turned penitently to his husband. "What do you need, honey? Some water? A Clif Bar? A blow job?"

Ben smiled wearily. "My neck is really tight."

"I'm on it," Shawna told him.

And she was, instantly, digging into his shoulders with her strong little hands.

Ben gave an involuntary moan. "We should be reaching the checkpoints soon."

Michael did not like the sound of that. "What are they checking us for?"

"Tickets, mostly," said Ben. "Stowaways. Feathers. Stuff like that."

"Feathers?"

"It's the worst kind of MOOP," said Shawna. "It's completely irretrievable. They won't let you bring feathers in at all."

Michael already knew about MOOP—Matter Out of Place—Burning Man's version of litter, only stricter than litter, since it included things like apple cores and dishwater, anything that might alter the delicate ecology of an irreversibly lifeless alkali flat. It figured that a place without birds would not look kindly upon feathers.

"Damn," said Michael. "Good thing I hid my boa up my ass."

Ben grinned. "Never mind that. Where's your ticket?"

"I have it," said Michael somewhat defensively. "It's in my bag."

“Which is where?”

“Shit, shit, shit!”

“In the trailer, right?”

They had been stopped for a moment, so Michael knew what he had to do. “I’ll get it,” he said. “Just don’t leave me. I’ll never find the car again.”

“Wear your goggles,” said Ben.

“Shit.”

“They’re in the bag too?”

“Don’t lecture me,” said Michael. “Not now.”

“What did I say? Did I say anything?”

“Hang on,” said Shawna, fumbling in the back until she produced a filmy blue-and-green scarf and handed it to Michael.

“I won’t be able to see,” he said.

“Just over your mouth and nose, dude. And keep your head down.”

He opened the door and plunged into the tempest of grit. It was called a whiteout, but under the headlight beams, the stinging air was a hybrid of mustard and taupe, a noxious gas on another planet. Leaning into it, scarf pressed to his face, he made his way to the trailer, where he fumbled through a web of bungee cords until he found the bag. The traffic, to his alarm, had already begun to move again, so he stumbled back to the door, expecting chastisement from an orchestra of angry car horns. But people weren’t honking at all. *They were not honking.*

He opened the door, scrambled into the seat, slammed the door.

“Got it?” asked Ben.

“Got it.” He dug the ticket out of his bag and held it up as belated proof of his competency. It was as intricate as currency, almost as large, an extravagance of design worthy of admission to Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory.

He handed the scarf back to Shawna. She dusted the side of his head with it. “You’re gonna get a lot blonder before this is over.”

“It’s a look,” said Michael.

Shawna had lobbied for years to “do something fun” with her old queer uncle’s hair, but he had steadfastly refused, claiming, now that he was gray, to be “one of God’s blonds.” He had never seen anyone his age with pleasingly dyed hair.

The dust, however, when examined in the mirror, did do something interesting—a lighter, duller, more powdery effect that bordered on *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

He already wanted a shower.

At the checkpoint they were greeted by a lanky kid in dreads and buckskin who leaned into the Outback with a flashlight. He was completely furred with dust like a mannequin in an attic, or maybe an astronaut blighted with an alien fungus, but he still managed to exude proficiency and good cheer. “Welcome home, folks!”

“Thanks!” said Ben.

“How many you got?”

Ben held up the tickets. “Three. One in the back.”

“And no feathers,” Michael added.

“What?”

“I am without feathers. Feather-free.”

Ben shot him a look. “Let the guy do his job, honey.”

“It’s cool,” said the guy. “Is he a Burgin?”

“Is he ever,” said Shawna.

“A *what*?” asked Michael.

“A Burning Man virgin,” Ben explained, without turning back to Michael.

They were talking about him as if he weren’t there, or at least as if they didn’t care. It was oddly reminiscent of childhood road trips in Florida with his family. *Is this the little feller’s first time at Parrot Jungle?*

“Do I sound Burginal?” Michael asked the guy.

“A little.” Perfect white teeth flashed from the concrete-colored face.

“Don’t sweat it. You’ll get into it quicker than you think. My dad did.”

“Your dad’s a lot younger than I am.”

“I doubt that,” said the guy cheerfully. “He’s pretty old.”

“Oh good,” said Michael, deadpanning.

“Take it real slow.” The guy was talking to Ben again, grown-up to grown-up.

From there, they were divided into separate lanes, the boundaries of which were almost impossible to read in the whiteout. Place de la Concorde, thought Michael, though a lot slower, of course, and some of the

vehicles were as big as houses. They *were* houses, lumbering out of the dust like weary elephants, their hides absorbing the paleness of the land, their Rent Me ads pasted into submission.

“You think there’ll be greeters?” Shawna asked Ben.

Michael was thinking, Is there a maître d’ at a tsunami?

“I doubt it,” said Ben. “The guy back there said ‘Welcome home,’ so maybe they’re doubling up in the whiteout.”

Shawna touched Michael’s shoulder. “Normally there are people who greet you and say ‘Welcome home’ and get all the Burgins to roll in the dust.”

“Forget that shit,” he said.

“You have to give in to it, Michael.”

“I don’t have to give in to anything. I have nothing against getting dirty under controlled circumstances—”

“Not the ritual. The dust itself. You have to make peace with it sooner or later. You have to . . . let the barnacle form.”

“Seriously, Shawna, if you tell ’em I’m a Burgin . . . I have to let the barnacle form? What sort of fucked-up shit is that?”

She giggled. “Okay, then . . . a pearl can’t be a pearl without a grain of sand.”

“*Grain?* You want grains?” He tousled his hair briskly. “I’ve been out in that shit, sister. Don’t talk to me about grains.”

“Okay,” said Shawna, going comically hangdog the way she had done as a child. “There’s gonna be one really disappointed hippie chick in a Raggedy Ann wig . . . with big baby-doll shoes . . . and a landing strip the exact same color as the wig.”

“Now you’re just trying to scare me,” said Michael.

Their tank commander chuckled. “It’s a moot point, anyway. I think we’re there.”

“There” in this instance could have meant a physical arrival or a simple lifting of the dust, a magician’s trick that left them on a vast darkling plain dotted with phantasmagorical color. It was probably both things, of course, but regardless of the alchemy, they found themselves, suddenly, on the outskirts of a Fellini carnival on Mars.

“We need to look for street signs,” said Ben.

“What’s our address?” asked Shawna.

Michael knew the answer to that—"Eight o'clock and Edelweiss"—so all eyes were instantly upon him, widened in exaggerated amazement.

"What?" said Michael. "I wanted to know where we live in case I get lost."

"But you remembered," said Shawna. "Nice job."

Michael accepted the compliment, though he knew he could not have done it without the aid of Julie Andrews and the von Trapp children.

He remembered, too, that the streets formed concentric circles around the playa (an open space for art installations), and that the whole place was two miles wide. *Two fucking miles*. Like the Great Wall of China, this psychedelic gypsy camp could be seen from space: a crescent moon blazing gold in a valley of nothingness.

But even satellite photos had not prepared Michael for the immensity of the place. As they drove down one of the streets, past block after block of dust-fuzzed tents and shade structures jutting like bat wings into the sky, the night rang with the sound of sledgehammers on rebar. It was early days, Ben pointed out, so the full effect had yet to be realized; it was still a coloring book waiting for clever children and their crayons. But one by one, between patches of vacant darkness, the camps were emerging, a conspiracy of colored lights and towers and streaming banners, an ephemeral city rising to its feet.

It *could* be another planet, thought Michael, if not for the familiar moon lolling on the dark shoulder of the mountains.

Ben reached over and held his leg. "It's gonna be blue while we're here," he said.

"What's gonna be blue?"

"The moon, honey. We're having a full-fledged blue moon. You know what that is, right?"

Michael did not know, actually.

"I'm familiar with the whorehouse," he said.

Wisteria Toes

The Stanford boys were getting rowdier downstairs, howling Margaret's name in the parlor as if it were a football fight song. To Andy, something in their tone sounded cruel, something beyond the usual coarseness of men toward the girls at the Blue Moon. He wondered if Margaret's age had made her the butt of mean jokes they shared with each other. If so, he hoped she didn't know it.

He had put on the dress tonight, so the bedroom door was latched. A warm, fickle breeze from the window found the chiffon and made it flirt with his legs. His toenails, as of this afternoon, were painted a shade of wisteria Margaret had chosen to match the dress. He walked slowly across the room, pivoting on his toes like an English lady going barefoot on the lawn of her country estate. Summery, he thought. That's how I feel. He had heard Loretta Young use that word once in a movie and had always wanted to use it himself. *My, don't you look summery tonight.*

He extended his leg and gazed down at the perfect nail polish, the curve of his calf under the wispy fabric. It was hard to imagine how this could be improved upon. Below the knees, thanks to Margaret, he was all he was ever meant to be.

A noise at the door made him stiffen in alarm. It was not a knock either but a thwarted invasion, which could only mean Mama herself was shaking the door against its hardware-store latch. She did it, as usual, more out of pique than in hope of entry, but Andy, in his rising panic, could almost feel the screws flying out.

"I'm not decent, Mama."

"Well, why the hell ain't you?"

"I'm just . . . changing clothes."

“Ain’t nothin’ I ain’t seen before!”

Andy kept quiet. *Oh, the things you haven’t seen before.*

“Better not be diddlin’ yourself. You gotta save that for somebody nice.”

“Mama, please—”

“I left ’em by the kitchen door.”

He was too shaken to think straight. “What?”

“You said you wanted the truck tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” He had dropped Gloria Watson’s name at supper, so Mama, going all whirly-eyed at the mere thought of Gloria’s dowry, had offered transportation. She probably wouldn’t mind one bit if Andy were to knock Gloria up. Mama had once remarked, in all seriousness, that shotgun weddings paid just as well as the other kind. Not that there was a chance of Andy knocking *anyone* up.

“Where are you takin’ her?”

“I have to get dressed, Mama. I’m late.”

Both things were true; tonight was Lasko’s night at the Martin, and he got off work at nine. It wasn’t the ideal solution to the problem, but Andy had been left with no other choice. Lasko hadn’t shown up at school for several days, and Andy’s low-key detective work at Eagle Drugs had produced only a cryptic explanation from Mr. Yee: “He got the day off. He’s not feeling so good.”

Andy hoped that what Lasko was feeling was remorse for having hocked the valise. If not remorse, at least embarrassment over the betrayal of their friendship. Or, barring that, some degree of fear that Andy might actually stand up for himself. A theft was a theft, even when it involved a valise left at a brothel that a hooker had entrusted to a boy who had lent it—just lent it, mind you—to another boy. The law might like to know about this, Andy figured. There could be serious consequences.

It was strange to feel such unbridled hurt and anger. As a rule, he tried not to indulge in those emotions, knowing how easily they could overwhelm him. Hurt and anger were to be expected by a boy like him, living where he lived, knowing what he knew about himself. But Lasko’s action was beyond the pale. It implied that Andy was completely unworthy of respect, exempt from the ordinary rules of society.

It implied that Andy had no choice but to keep his mouth shut.

He waited in the shadows outside the Martin while the dinner crowd dispersed. He had already decided that confronting Lasko in the restaurant (or worse yet, in the kitchen) would be foolish. Lasko's father could be there, for one thing, or any number of relatives who didn't know Andy from Adam and would surely unite against a stranger with an accusation. It was better to talk to Lasko where no one else could hear them. Better to wait until he was walking home.

Ten minutes passed. Twenty. Andy studied the stragglers left on the porch, the kitchen help spilling joylessly out of the back, but Lasko was nowhere to be seen. The only person he recognized was Lasko's sister Hegazti, the shy, big-armed girl so adept at balancing plates. He considered questioning her about Lasko, but decided instead to tail her, since that would probably yield more information.

She was heading away from the tracks along the alley behind Bridge Street. No one else was going that way, so Andy, wary of looking ominous, waited until Hegazti had turned onto another street before sprinting to catch up with her. When he saw her, she was turning again, this time into a vacant lot bristling with spindly weeds and auto parts. There was a house on the far side, next to which a flaking wall bore the ghostly remains of a word—**LOTHING**—which marked the back of a haberdashery that had gone bust when Andy was still a youngster. A naked lightbulb on the landing caught Hegazti's red blouse and made it ignite in the darkness.

She was talking to someone in the shadows. Her voice was gentle, placating. Andy could not make out anything, so he moved closer.

" . . . I made it specially for you."

"No! I don't want it!" His voice was slurred, but it was Lasko.

"It's cream-filled."

"No me molestes!"

"Cabron!"

The red blouse extinguished itself. Andy heard a door slam. He walked as casually as possible past the house, implying that he was on the way home himself. Hegazti was inside now, her big arms all but blocking the view into a brightly lit kitchen. She was talking loudly to another woman, Lasko's mother presumably, but she was speaking Basque now, not Spanish. Andy could not understand a word of it, but her agitation made it clear that she had been the one who slammed the door.

So where had Lasko been?

Andy peered across the weedy lot, where a garage was leaning drunkenly against an amputated cottonwood. Its splintered walls had been patched with a Coca-Cola sign as big as a bushel basket. A corona of light, too faint to be electric, was seeping around the edges of the sign. Someone is in there now, he thought.

He moved closer, already weighing and discarding his words for what lay ahead. He had come here in the name of his self-respect, his honor, and it was too late to back out now. He stopped at the garage door and addressed it quietly.

“Lasko?”

Nothing.

“It’s Andy Ramsey. I’d like my book back, please.”

Still no response, just the sound of clumsy movement inside. Andy commanded himself to breathe.

“I won’t make trouble, Lasko. I just want the book back.”

The door creaked open. Lasko appeared in silhouette against the erratic flicker of a kerosene lamp. He was swaying slightly in a soiled undershirt and baggy trousers, and even from a distance, Andy could smell the *basco* wine on his breath.

“I haven’t finished reading it,” Lasko said.

“I don’t care. I want it back. I know what happened to the valise.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I saw it, Lasko. I even know how much you got for it.”

Lasko’s eyes darted nervously toward the house. “Pipe down, okay? I’ll get you the book.” He beckoned Andy with a sloppy sweep of his arm.

Andy hesitated, peering into the garage. “Is this where you live?”

“It’s sorta my clubhouse.”

Andy knew that was a lie. He could see a swayback bed against one wall, a table with a washbasin and a toothbrush, a nice shirt for school hanging off a nail on the wall. It looked, unmistakably, like a place to which someone had been banished. This was Lasko’s Elba, and he was ashamed of it, a fact that somehow, to Andy, made him much more sympathetic, if not an ounce more trustworthy.

He entered the lamplit cavern. Lasko tugged the door shut behind them. “Take a load off,” he said. Andy hesitated, wondering if his righteous

indignation could survive sitting down. Finally he sank to the edge of the bed, since there was nowhere else to sit. Lasko pulled the *Book of Marvels* from a shelf above the bed and handed it to Andy. "I'm sorry," he said soberly, the way drunks do. "I enjoyed it greatly." He sat on the other end of the bed, head down, hands dangling between his legs, a whipped puppy. His dejection seemed so real that Andy's ire dwindled.

"It's not the book, Lasko, and you know it. That valise wasn't yours to hock. It was a gift to me from someone who was hurt because she thought I was the one who had hocked it. I had to lie to her about where I had lost it. If you needed money for Frisco . . . for the swimming pool or something . . . I would have been happy to . . . well, I might have been able . . . but this way I can't trust you at all. I'd like to be your friend, but why should I even help you anymore? Tell me that, Lasko. How do I know you won't stick up a bank before you get on the Rexall Train?"

And that, Andy realized, was a question he had never imagined asking anyone. The sheer novelty of it was exhilarating—not to mention the chance to sound like a spunky dame in a radio play. Lasko, however, was not in the least impressed, showing no sign of penitence whatsoever. His eyes were still fixed on the greasy packed earth beneath his feet. "I didn't hock that valise," he said gruffly.

Andy groaned. He was tired of being a lady about this.

"I didn't," said Lasko.

"Don't play me for a fool, Lasko. I went to the pawnshop. I looked at the tag myself. It said 'Madrigal' plain as day."

Lasko shrugged morosely. "There's more than one Madrigal around here."

Scowling, Andy raised his voice. "*Who?* Hegazti?"

"Shhhh." Lasko pressed a finger to his cushiony lips, then whispered a single word: "Papi."

"Your father hocked my valise?" Andy pictured the sourpuss in the restaurant kitchen, the coarser, older version of Lasko who had barked orders to Hegazti and never acknowledged Andy's presence. "What right did he have to do that?"

Lasko started to speak but stopped himself.

"Lasko?"

"He said he didn't want no *puta* suitcase in his house."

*Put*a. Whore. One Spanish word Andy knew well.

"But how did he know about Margaret?" Andy had never told Lasko where the valise had come from. They'd never talked about the valise at all.

"Who's Margaret?" asked Lasko.

Oh, thought Andy. He *doesn't* know. The old man had simply seen Andy with the valise at the Martin, and that had made it *puta* by association.

"It doesn't matter," said Andy. "Just someone I know at the Blue Moon. Forget it."

A long, draining silence followed. Then Andy said, "My mother runs a legitimate business, you know."

Lasko grunted yes. "My old man goes there sometimes."

No surprise there. Half the town did. "But he doesn't approve of me." It wasn't a question, just a stark statement of fact.

"Nope," said Lasko with a wicked smile, waiting a moment before reaching over to sock Andy's arm with the utmost gentleness. His drawn-out sparring match had finally made contact. "He thinks you're a bad influence."

"So he stole my valise."

"Yep."

"And he makes you live out here?"

Lasko nodded. "Till I've learned to be a man, he says."

Another long silence while Andy wondered what exactly that meant.

"Are you scared of him?"

Lasko hesitated, then pulled a Carnation Milk box from under the bed. There was a small pistol inside, swaddled in kitchen rags and dull with dust. To Andy's relief Lasko didn't pick it up, just pushed the box back under the bed.

"You wouldn't use that, would you?"

"Not if I ain't got to."

Andy didn't like the sound of that, so he chose to dodge the subject entirely. "Well . . . soon enough you'll be getting away from him."

Lasko shook his head slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"The Rexall Train ain't coming."

At first Andy couldn't take this in. He had already pictured the train so vividly in his mind's eye, right down to the cosmetics car and the maraschino cherry exhibit, that it seemed almost impossible that he might not see it for real.

"Why not?" he asked.

"*I don't know why not.*" Lasko's anger had flared out of nowhere. "It just ain't. Mr. Yee got a telegram two days ago. It's goin' to every goddamn state in the union 'cept Nevada. They're circlin' right around us . . . Utah, Idaho, Oregon. I guess we ain't worth it. I don't blame 'em. I wouldn't come here neither."

Andy made a murmur of sympathy. Or tried his best to.

So *that* was it. This explained why Lasko had been hiding out. It explained why Hegazti had been trying to soothe him with pastries. His dream of escape, preposterous as it might have been, had died overnight, so he was mourning it with wine and bile. It had nothing to do with the valise. Nothing to do with Andy either.

Andy slapped his hands on his thighs and rose. "I gotta go, Lasko."

"Why?"

"I just have to. It's late. I gotta get the truck back to Mama. I'm really sorry about the train."

Slack-mouthed, Lasko looked up at him. "You're leavin' cuz there ain't gonna be no train?"

"Don't be a nincompoop. I was never even *going* on the train."

"Why not?"

"You didn't *ask* me, Lasko. You just say things and strut around like a rooster. You act like I'm not even here. You don't even call me by my name."

Lasko stood up. "I did ask you—"

"No, you didn't. Never. I would've remembered."

Their faces were even now, inches apart. Andy was awash in the smell of wine and sweat and hair oil. The almost tactile smell of transgression.

"I meant to ask you," said Lasko.

"That's it? That's what you have to say?"

Lasko's eyelashes dipped like a raven's wing over a dark lake. " 'I meant to ask you, Andy'?"

Andy couldn't help but smile. "Too late for that now."

“You woulda gone with me, you mean?”

“I mighta.”

“I thought you didn’t like me.”

“Why would I have agreed to anything if I didn’t like you? You don’t say ‘Abyssinia’ to someone you don’t like.”

Lasko stumbled forward like a bear hit with buckshot, wrapping his arms around Andy’s shoulders. It seemed no more than a drunken display of affection, so Andy received him awkwardly. The truth was, he would have liked a kiss at the moment, a tender, uncomplicated one, the kiss of a prince in a movie musical. But there was no denying how good the hug felt. He wanted it to last longer than it did.

When Lasko pulled away, he looked Andy square in the eyes. “Wanna stay?” he asked huskily. “Wanna mess around?” One of his hands had already moved from Andy’s back to the front of Andy’s trousers, where, in the most perfunctory way, he began to rub Andy’s pecker through the rumpled linen, as if it were a magic lamp from which a genie could be summoned on command.

“Stop,” said Andy. “Don’t.”

“Boys can do this, you know.” Lasko was still rubbing away. “We help each other out. It’s what we do.”

“Lasko, no.”

“I’ll suck you first, if you want. I don’t mind.”

“I’m going now. Let go of me.”

“C’mon. We won’t kiss or nothin’. I promise. We’re buddies, right? We’ll do it like men.”

Andy swerved away from him to make good on his word, but Lasko seized his arm and yanked him back. “You think you’re better’n me?”

Andy winced, shaking his head. “No,” he said softly. “Just different.”

“You ain’t no different,” Lasko snarled. “You’re a godforsaken nance. Everybody knows about you.”

“Nobody knows about me,” said Andy.

He opened the door and went out. He knew Lasko wouldn’t follow him, because their raised voices had already attracted attention from the house. Lasko’s mother, the one who cooked the “World-Famous Lamb” at the Martin, was standing by her back door, watching him in leery silence. Andy

passed within yards of her, projecting innocence with calm, letting his dignity ascend from his wisteria toes.

“Good night, Mrs. Madrigal,” he said quietly, heading into the night.

The Sudden Residence

Brian had Yelped a place for breakfast in Winnemucca, a diner on the main drag with an old-timey sign that looked promising. They could have eaten back at the Winnie, but they were chasing down their little mystery today, so bacon and eggs seemed about right by way of fortification. Plus he wanted to get Anna out of the barge, help her reconnect spiritually with her long-lost hometown—a fucking *challenge* on this strip crammed with mini-marts and 1960s motels. At least the diner hinted at a serious lineage, with its shiny pine walls and leatherette booths.

“You know,” he said. “This coulda been here when you were here.”

“ ’Fraid not,” said Wren as she held up the menu for Anna to peruse. “Nineteen forty-eight. Says so here on the back.”

“Well, that’s pretty old,” he offered, somewhat deflated.

“I was in Minneapolis by then,” Anna told him sweetly. “With a wife and a four-year-old daughter.”

“Ah . . . right.”

Anna gave him one of her private nice-try benedictions and turned back to Wren. “Dare we consider the raspberry crepes?”

“So how did that even happen?” asked Wren.

“What? Crepes in Winnemucca?”

Wren chuckled. “The wife and the daughter.”

“Oh . . . at an army dance.”

“No shit?”

“Fort Ord. Do you know where that is?”

“Monterey Bay,” Brian replied, though he himself had not been asked.

“They used to train troops there,” Anna continued. “I typed munitions reports for an alcoholic officer. I had a lot of drunks to deal with back then.”

“So you met your wife at this dance.” Wren was coaxing her back to the love story. Women, Brian had noticed, always want to know where people met. Even tough customers like Wren want to know. “What was it about her that made—”

“—a man like me want to get married?”

“Yeah.”

“She was pretty,” said Anna. “I was lonely. I was looking for normal, and she had more than her share of it.”

“Did you have a sex life?”

“When I put my mind to it.”

Brian made a secret screwy face at his wife. She made one back and handed him the menu with a flourish, as if to say “Leave us to our girl talk.” They were in love with each other, these two. He had known it since Tahoe. It’s exactly what he had hoped for, of course—Wren’s full grasp of the primal force that was Anna—but he was already feeling a little selfish about having laid such a terrible trap.

Don’t get too attached, he wanted to say. I don’t want you to hurt like I will.

The waitress who took their orders was a willowy blonde with loopy earrings who asked cheerfully if they were “just passing through.” The town did seem geared to people on their way to somewhere else, but Brian found himself touched by her low expectations, so he volunteered that Anna had grown up there.

“Really?” said the waitress, turning to Anna. “Whereabouts?”

“Out on Jungo Road,” Anna replied discreetly.

“Gah. My husband works out there in the gold mines. We moved here from North Dakota last year. He’s an engineer.”

“There are gold mines on Jungo Road?” Anna’s interest was clearly piqued.

“It’s not what you think. Not like big chunks or anything—I wish. They leach little tiny bits out of the ground. With cyanide. In these big pits. Pays pretty good.”

“I would imagine,” Brian deadpanned, glancing at Wren.

The waitress, no dummy, seemed to catch his drift. “It’s not harmful to the environment or anything. They’ve proven it. They’ve done tests.”

Yep, he thought. The best money can buy.

She took their orders and left. When she was out of earshot, Wren leaned across the table on her elbows and let her pewter ponytail flick once for emphasis.

“Do not give her a hard time.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s nice. And her husband works in a pit full of cyanide.”

He couldn’t help but grin. “You know it’s evil, right? There’s not more gold left to take, so they’re poisoning it out of the earth. And when that shit spills, which it does on a fairly regular basis—”

“On the other hand,” said Anna, “the crepes look a bit iffy.”

Brian recognized this tactic, the sly way Anna had of deflecting his zealotry. He looked at her directly. “But this is out where you grew up, right? The very ground.”

“Well . . . the very ground is now the Blue Moon Family Fun Center and Casino.” She smiled coyly, widening her eyes. “No relation.”

Wren chuckled. “What a hoot. We have to go out there.”

“No, dear, we don’t.”

“Are you being a snob, Anna Madrigal?”

“No . . . it just seems to me that a place that calls itself a Family Fun Center and Casino couldn’t possibly succeed at being either. Anyway, I’ve already seen it. Jake showed it to me on his magic slate. A virtual tour. Absolutely blood-curdling.”

Brian smiled at her.

“I wouldn’t fret over the cyanide,” Anna added. “I’m sure they keep it away from the Family Fun.”

Wren took a sip of her water. “Did they have gold when you were here?”

“Yes, but . . . mostly just rumors of it. It was all so . . . negligible.” She seemed to meditate on that for a moment. “Pity Mama didn’t know about cyanide. She would’ve jumped on that like a duck on a june bug.”

Brian had rented a charcoal Jeep Cherokee for their tour of Winnemucca, so Wren insisted that Anna sit up front, the better to see the sights on her check list: the Catholic church, a local park, a Basque restaurant down by the Amtrak station. The first item, though—more crucial than the others,

apparently—was the residence of Oliver Sudden at 2261 Sandstone Drive, so Brian had plugged the address into the GPS. On the way, however, he remembered something.

“You know they still have brothels in Winnemucca.”

“You don’t say,” his wife said drily from the back seat.

“Aren’t you a little curious?”

“I dunno,” said Wren. “What about you, Anna?”

“We’re on an adventure,” Anna said, without really answering the question.

“It’s on the way,” Brian told them. “Down by the freeway. They call it the Line.”

It was five minutes away, and easy enough to find once they arrived in the neighborhood. There were two homemade signs nailed at wacky angles to a dusty cottonwood. One had an arrow pointing to PARKING, the other to BROTHELS.

“Don’t park,” said Wren. “Just do a drive-by.”

The Line was basically a mini-mall built of warping red plywood, its facade aping the storefronts of an old western town. Brian had seen this cheesy trick dozens of times in his travels. Sometimes the front disguised a gigantic box store full of Indian souvenirs; others were interstate rest stops designed to lure weary travelers with kids. He wondered if the Line was several brothels or just one big warehouse full of flat-broke girls, patiently waiting to do anal for truckers.

There was a stretch limo parked out front, but no sign of life whatsoever.

“Do you think that’s a customer?” asked Wren.

“I doubt it. Where would a limo come from?”

“Good point.”

“It’s probably theirs, is my guess. They use it to drive the girls around town. You know . . . to the casinos or something.”

“Let’s go,” said Wren. “I’m getting the creeps.”

Brian felt the same way. Was there anything more depressing than a sex joint at 10:00 a.m.—without lights or music or lust itself to transform reality?

“Our place was a lot homier,” said Anna as they pulled away.

“I’ll bet,” said Wren.

Brian regretted having made the suggestion, so he forced some cheer into his voice. "Okay, campers, here we go! Let's go find Mr. Sudden!"

The GPS led them to what might have been a suburban neighborhood if the houses had not been so random. It was certainly someone's effort at suburbia: vinyl-sided shoe boxes attempting grandeur with a single tall window in the middle. Their lawns, defiantly green, stopped abruptly at the edge of the tufted desert.

"That's it," said Wren, spotting the number on a mailbox.

Brian parked on the road and turned off the engine. "I'll be right back. You should probably lock the doors. Just for the hell of it."

Wren gave him a quizzical look.

"You never know," he said. "It could be a meth lab or something."

Wren rolled her eyes at him. "In that case, shouldn't I keep the doors unlocked and the engine running?" She leaned forward to speak quietly into Anna's ear, sister-to-sister. "You haven't been Googling meth labs, have you?"

"Not that I know of," came the demure reply.

"I didn't mean you," he said, irked by their teasing.

"No more *Breaking Bad* for you," said Wren.

He climbed out of the Jeep and headed toward the front door, the sun falling hot on his neck. A fat-wheeled plastic tricycle in the driveway made him wonder for the third or fourth time if this place could possibly yield anything from Anna's past.

He rang a melodious doorbell.

A small dog began to bark inside. He could see it hurling itself into the air behind the lace on the glass panel in the door. Then there were footsteps, and someone appeared to scoop up the dog with one hand and open the door with the other. She was thirtyish and short, unusually short, with a heart-shaped face that tilted up at him like a shield against an alien invader. "Can I help you, sir?"

Sir. Nowadays that meant old man.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "Is this the Sudden residence?"

She looked mildly annoyed. "Not really, no. That's my uncle's name. He lives with us. What's this about?"

If only I knew, he thought. "I have a lady here with me who thinks she may have a connection with him. She lived here a long time ago." He

gestured toward the Jeep as if the mere sight of it would confirm his claim. Armed with so little information, he sounded like an itinerant scam artist. A dangerous one, to boot.

“He’s not here,” said the woman. “He’s working today.”

“Oliver Sudden, right?”

“Yes, Ollie. Oliver. Whatever.”

“Is it possible for us to visit him?”

“If you’re willing to drive. He’s a greeter at the Blue Moon.”

Brian was struck dumb for a moment.

“Do you know where that is?” asked the woman.

“The Family Fun Center?”

“That’s the one.”

He thanked her and almost sprinted back to the Jeep.

“Guess where we’re going,” he said to Anna.

No Two Ways

The octopus stole the show that first morning in Black Rock City. Michael had already seen it online, spewing fire at night, tentacles flailing ominously. It had been an awesome sight in the old-fashioned sense of the word, but somehow it had not prepared him for the high comedy of the great beast in daylight, this eye-rolling assemblage of garbage cans nodding to its fans like a showgirl in a supermarket.

“El Pulpo Mecanico,” said Ben, as the octopus sashayed past their enclosure in its own churning ecosystem of dust.

“Marcus Bachmann,” Michael suggested.

Ben chuckled and returned to the task of assembling their camp stove. He was wearing the “cruelty-free” loincloth he had made at home. It was basically a string with a faux buckskin flap that managed to cover the crown of his dick while successfully containing nothing whatsoever. Michael was wearing his purple Etsy nightshirt. It had been custom-made for him by a seamstress in Turkey named Yosma, whose husband, a short, burly daddy with a mustache, had modeled this style next to a concrete Venus in their backyard. In their Etsy “convo” Michael had been tempted to tell Yosma (in the name of global goodwill) that his husband found her husband kind of hot, but Ben had nixed the idea as soon as Michael playfully proposed it. Words embarrassed Ben more than nudity ever could.

“Omigod, guys, you have to try Mystopia!” This was Shawna, with a childlike Christmas-morning madness in her dark brown eyes. Michael could see her mother there, the endearingly daffy Connie Bradshaw, who died a day after giving birth to Shawna. He would always regard Brian as Shawna’s only functioning parent, but Connie lived on in Shawna’s animated features and breathless delivery.

“What’s Mystopia?”

“It’s one of the camps—this lounge where they spray you with mist. Fucking heaven!”

“I dunno,” said Michael, searching for the sunglass lenses to his goggles. “I’m not sure I wanna be washed by strangers.”

“They don’t *wash* you, they *mist* you. Like a big Evian spray bottle.”

“He’s thinking of the Human Carcass Wash,” said Ben.

“Ah,” said Michael. “So I am.”

“You’d be able to tell the difference,” said Shawna. “At the Carcass Wash you have to wash other people before they wash you.”

“Isn’t that always the way,” said Michael.

He found the lenses in a plastic storage box and, after some effort, popped them into his goggles. Now all he needed was his nuclear-strength sunblock, his purple boots for the bicycle, the right silk scarf for the nightshirt, his CamelBak filled with water, his stovepipe hat, and . . . what else? He should have made a checklist for every step of this transformational journey to radical self-expression.

“You know what would be nice?” he said. “If you could just fly into here without the six-hour traffic jam. You could land right on the playa . . . have a fully stocked RV just waiting for you, with delicious meals and killer costumes and everything you need. Then you’d be free to wander and find your bliss.”

Shawna gaped at him as if he’d just proposed genocide. “Ewww.”

“They have that already,” Ben told him. “It’s called plug and play.”

“And that’s a bad thing because—”

“Because . . . you have to *earn* this experience,” said Shawna. “Radical self-reliance is part of the deal. We’re leaving the default world behind.”

“Meaning everything that’s not here?”

“Yes.”

“And plug and play is just a bunch of CEOs and Republicans,” Ben added.

“C’mon! Here?”

“Well, libertarians, at the very least. Rich people getting their freak on.”

“A bunch of shirtcocks,” said Shawna. “Gag me.”

“Guess I’d better ask what that is.”

“They run around in shirts with no pants.”

Michael mugged at her. “As opposed to the half dozen *totally* naked people painted blue I saw on my way to the porta potties this morning?”

“It’s complicated, Michael. It’s a matter of intent. And commitment.”

Michael picked up the manual with the schedule of events. “You’re right. It’s just hard to know where to start with my intent and commitment. Let’s see now . . .” He flipped through the pages, reading entries at random. “ ‘Valerie Hummingbird Birthing Your Inner Voice’ . . . ‘Cirque du Cliché Morning Soiree’ . . . ‘Kunda Your Lini’ . . . ‘Fake Jamaican Accent Hour’ . . . ‘Dr. Scrote’s Circumcision Wagon and Calamari Hut.’ ”

Ben laughed, still tinkering with the stove. “You made up that last one.”

“I swear to God.” Michael held out the manual as proof.

“That is fucking hilarious,” said Shawna.

“Maybe to you,” said Michael.

It *was* funny, of course, so he laughed along with them. “Forget about the stove,” he told Ben. “Let’s go find someone who’ll gift us some breakfast.”

She laughed, but gave him a faintly reproving look. “Now don’t be a Sparkle Pony.”

“I won’t,” said Michael, “and you can tell me what that is after breakfast.”

“There’s a camp on the next plaza that serves bacon and Bloody Marys.”

“I’m there,” said Michael. “Soon as I find the right scarf.”

They took their inaugural bike ride after breakfast. Michael was buzzed from the Bloody Marys, which helped to loosen him up as he attempted a bicycle for the first time in years. Fortunately, there were not that many other bikes to dodge as they pedaled down one of the clock-numbered streets toward the playa. He had not made a point of noticing street signs. He’d resolved simply to follow Ben and Shawna until he got the hang of things. He was happy to be their duckling.

“Lookin’ good, Sofa Daddy.” Shawna was shouting encouragement over her shoulder. It was hard to imagine *her* not looking good in anything, which in this case included a pink halter top, a pink tutu, and clunky boots trimmed in pink faux fur. It made her easy to spot whenever she briefly wove out of sight. His other reference point, his husband, was a brown

leather bowler above a sun-freckled back. He had swapped out the loincloth for a pair of shimmering (and sheer) green harem pants.

And so it went for the duckling—pink, green, pink, green—until they reached the broad crescent-shaped esplanade bordering the playa. There, without warning, he was swept into a perfect storm of vehicles: hundreds, maybe thousands, of bikes and art cars, some of them as enormous as tractor trailers and crammed with naked pagans, others small and troublesome, darting out of nowhere, tricked out like land sharks or Blinky from Pac-Man or chattering false teeth or cocks. This was not good. His time-honored ineptitude could do serious damage here—and not just to himself.

He flashed on the night he reunited with roller skates as an adult. He had zombie-walked his way into a rink in South City on a newly created “gay night,” only to cruise another guy so intensely that he crashed into him and drew blood. It had been *his* blood, at least—the usual bloody nose—and they had gone home together afterward, he and this beautiful doctor, this gynecologist, for God’s sake. They’d had six good years with each other, off and on—six glorious years—before Jon had been erased by a horror so new that it had only just been given a name.

So, how am I lookin’, Dr. Fielding?

What do you make of this old man in his nightshirt and top hat?

Am I grateful enough to still be here?

This rumination was all it took for him to lose sight of Ben and Shawna. Panicked, he began to wobble wildly on the bike, clutching the handlebars just the way you’re not supposed to, before braking and dismounting in the middle of the traffic in full expectation of calamity. To his amazement, the other bikers parted around him with nonchalant grace, like skiers avoiding a tree. No one even yelled. Maybe the silver mustache helped. Maybe he’d just been the lucky recipient of Radical Geezer Tolerance or some other immutable principle of Burning Man.

He pushed his bike to the other side of the esplanade. Pink and Green were waiting for him in the relative openness of the playa.

“Are you okay?” asked Ben.

“I’m fine. Just had to stop for a second.”

“It gets easier up ahead,” Ben told him.

It occurred to Michael that this was the great perk of being loved: someone to wait for you, someone to tell you that it will get easier up ahead.

Even when it might not be true.

This time, though, it was. The deep playa freed them from the crush of others, and soon the three of them—*just* the three of them—were racing across a hard platinum plain under the noonday sun, scarves streaming like banners, arms held aloft like Evita, or the queens in *Priscilla*. The arm thing, of course, was mostly Ben and Shawna's contribution, though Michael shared their exhilaration. He had never ridden a bike with such sustained abandon. He felt like one of those kids from *ET*, lifting off into the sky while the orchestra swelled accordingly.

At the moment they were heading toward three enormous letters—EGO—floating in the hazy beige of the horizon. This was their third art installation of the morning, after the Hand Holding the Fish and the Shipwreck, and all of them had appeared as mirages demanding investigation. The dust had a way of doing that, of teasing with its veils. So now they were off in pursuit of the giant EGO—the superego, as it were—and Ben was shouting something over his shoulder. It sounded to Michael like “loose hand,” which he found disturbing, though not particularly informative.

The explanation came from the playa itself, when his wheels hit a patch of alkali powder—“loose sand”—that brought his bike to a dead halt.

Just. Like. That.

He hit the playa hard, but of course it was “loose” in that spot, not the cracked, unyielding pavement that made bike riding such a breeze. He had been spared by the very thing that brought him down. Had he been on some suitably friendly drug, he might have pondered that paradox for a while, lying there in the desert's silky embrace, but he felt filthy and achy and, yes, embarrassed, even among family. He sat up to prove that he wasn't dead. He was still sitting there, slurping from his CamelBak, when Ben and Shawna pushed their bikes onto the scene.

“I give up,” he said with a crooked smile.

“Now you're getting it,” said Shawna.

He laughed. They all laughed. Surrender had been the theme of her Burning Man orientation. He wondered, though, if she was also referring to something else.

A blue moon was on the way, after all. There was fertilizing to be done.

After the bike trip, Shawna went to visit her friends at Chakralicious, so Ben and Michael returned to their tent for a nap. Ben's youth—and, okay, sure, his natural athleticism—made him more active than Michael, but he insisted on an afternoon nap. Michael was grateful for that. Not to mention Ben's love of a quality air mattress. The entire floor of the tent was thick, cushioned relief from the playa.

It was too warm to cuddle, so they lay side by side with their feet touching, listening to the murmurs of siesta time. Michael was still fretting over Shawna's dreams of a playa pregnancy, so he approached the subject head-on.

"Did you get a chance to talk to her?"

Ben knew what he meant and, thankfully, did not pretend otherwise. "There haven't been that many chances, honey."

"I thought maybe when we were on the Shipwreck." Michael had waited in the captain's cabin, slightly nauseous from the heat and the crazily tilting decks, while Ben and Shawna went off to explore the rigging. They had been gone long enough for him to start feeling one with the tableau, as if he were the captain himself, every bit as dusty and abandoned as the old maps and sea chests surrounding him.

"That was hardly enough time," Ben told him.

"How long does it take to say thanks but no thanks . . . and I'm sorry my tactless husband didn't handle this as well as he should have?"

Michael had hoped for a smile, but all he got was another question:

"And you're sure that's what I want to say?"

The uncharacteristic sarcasm in Ben's tone stung Michael. He kept his gaze on the dome of the tent for fear of what he might find in Ben's eyes.

"Tell me then," he said calmly. "Tell me what you feel."

"Now he asks," said Ben, as if he were talking to someone else.

There was a loud gas-jet roar somewhere outside the tent. Michael recognized it as the octopus, shooting flames for the sheer, frivolous hell of it.

“You don’t *want* to have a baby with her, do you?”

Ben took a moment to answer. “Having a baby with her and giving her the chance to have one are two different things.”

“No, sweetie. They aren’t. She’s not going anywhere. She’ll still be a part of our lives. It will be your baby, no matter what kind of spin you put on it.”

“She doesn’t expect me to parent,” said Ben. “Or you or anyone else. She’s been really clear about that.”

“Do you really want a baby around? Do you want that sort of life?”

Ben sighed. “There’s going to be a baby around no matter who fathers it. She wants to do this, and she’s a part of our lives. You said so yourself.”

“And you just said ‘fathers.’”

“What?”

“ ‘No matter who *fathers* it’ is what you just said. You would be that baby’s father, Ben. There’s no two ways about it.”

A long, brooding silence before Ben finally said, “Haven’t you ever thought about having a kid?”

He asked it so earnestly that Michael tried to answer accordingly.

“Not since I knew how it felt to be in love. That was all I wanted after that. That’s all I want now.”

Ben rolled on his side, his face golden in tent-filtered sun. “Seriously, you’ve never imagined it.”

“Oh . . . well . . . imagined it, sure. In my early teens. But it was just to give them cool names. I had a Zachary and an Atticus, as I recall. I had a Tallulah decades before Bruce and Demi thought of it.”

Ben gave him a drowsy smile. “Tallulah Tolliver? Really?”

Michael smiled back. “I know. If you say it fast enough, it becomes an al-Qaeda war cry.”

They had moved off topic, but Ben seemed as glad about that as Michael was. And Michael knew that Ben would commit to nothing, spermwise, unless Michael had agreed upon it. Such was the nature of their marriage.

“Let’s grab a snooze,” Ben said, taking Michael’s hand.

As he drifted into sleep, it occurred to Michael that Brian might be the only person who could talk some sense into Ben and Shawna. Her own father, after all, would understand how this arrangement would be a familial

minefield. But Brian wasn't here. He was somewhere north of here, holed up with his new bride in an air-conditioned RV, taking Mrs. Madrigal on a cryptic Trip to Bountiful.

As Boys Do

It had been ten days since Andy last saw Lasko. School had let out for the summer, and Andy had stayed away from Eagle Drugs. He didn't hate Lasko for what had happened that night in the Madrigals' garage. He was just embarrassed for them both, and sad that his very first courtship (for that's what it had been) had ended in ugliness. Lasko had wanted Andy—no doubt about that—but Lasko had wanted a boy, and Andy had not been up to it. Had Andy mustered the nerve that night to show Lasko his Wondrous Wisteria toenails—just unlaced his shoes and flat-out showed him—Lasko might have saved face, knowing he was more of a man than Andy, and the tragedy might have been averted. But Andy had kept the truth to himself, as boys do, leaving Lasko the rejected pansy, humiliated and broken.

Andy would not figure this out until many years later, when he was no longer in Winnemucca, no longer Andy. That summer his focus was on his own heartache. He would not give a moment's thought to the fact that Lasko's mother had watched him leave the garage. Nor would he think about Lasko's volatile father or the reason for Lasko's banishment. If he dwelled on anything from that night, it was *Richard Halliburton's Book of Marvels*, which, in his haste to flee, he had left behind.

June was high season at the Blue Moon, so Margaret stayed busy in her cabinette. Andy missed her company. He went to several movies alone at the American—his favorite being *Love Before Breakfast*, with Irene Dunne—but they lacked the zest that came from hashing things over afterward with Margaret. At night he stayed in his room, curled up next to the Lux Radio Theater, sometimes in the dress, sometimes not. He had less reason to worry about Mama now that the house was busy and Gloria Watson was ensconced in some girl's camp in Utah.

He felt so old that summer, older than he would ever feel again. His youth had grown decrepit, and there was nothing in sight to replace it, neither college nor marriage nor foreign travel nor work beyond some flunky job in town where they would still be calling him Mona's boy. Missing college was the hardest part. They never talked about it, but Andy knew that Mama didn't have near enough money to pay for a proper education. And even if she did, it was stashed away somewhere, a puny grubstake for her dreams of gold. That's why Mama was all-fire set on Gloria or someone like her, someone who would take Andy off her hands for good.

Mama loved him—he knew that—but it wasn't a useful love.

You cannot be loved by someone who doesn't want to know you.

Delphine's mother had died of influenza in Louisiana, so she'd taken the train to the funeral with Mama's blessings—one of the reasons Margaret was working harder now. Delphine's absence gave Mama a chance to paint her cabinette (or rather, have Andy paint it), since Delphine had made a mess of it doing some phony voodoo routine for a customer that involved, among other things, the sacrifice of a chicken. She'd been quick about it, she claimed, and the chicken had already been "condemned to dinner," as Mama sometimes put it, but Mama had been infuriated, knowing that other customers might not take kindly to the bloodstains on the walls.

Andy had scrubbed those stains with a whole bottle of Lysol, only to be left with big brown continents on the cream-colored walls. So tonight, because it was hot and noisy in the house, he had gone to Delphine's cabinette with a brush and a bucket of paint he'd bought that morning at Melarkey Hardware. He had chosen the color himself, the same shade of wisteria that secretly inhabited his socks. It was a good color, exotic but not flashy, and it would complement Delphine's olive skin.

He painted by the light of Delphine's ballerina lamp while listening to her Victrola. Sometimes his brushstrokes kept time with the music (right now it was Billie Holiday's "Did I Remember?"), and he twirled to his heart's content, knowing Margaret wasn't there to warn him of the inherent dangers. It was delicious to be surrounded by this flagrant color, without apology or deceit. He sang along, when he knew the words, applying them to his own melancholy.

You were in my arms, and that was all I knew. We were alone, we two. What did I say to you? . . . Did I remember to tell you, I adore you . . .

He couldn't remember the rest of that verse, but someone outside the cabINETTE finished it for him. Heroically basso. Just like in the movies.

. . . and I am livin' for you alone!

The voice was unmistakable. It was as if he had somehow summoned it. He went to the door and peered through the little diamond-shaped window. Lasko was twenty feet away, a dark figure smoking a cigarette under the blue neon moon. Andy opened the door and stepped out. Lasko turned slowly to face him.

"What are you doing down here?"

"I live here, remember?"

"I mean, out here in the fuck shacks."

Andy hesitated. "I'm painting this one. Were you looking for me?"

"That's a laugh!"

Another pause. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, Lasko. I didn't mean to, because I like you . . . and I'm sorry if—"

"Well, I ain't sorry. I got me some poontang tonight."

Andy felt a terrible dread growing in his chest like a tumor, making his throat go dry. "You like Lady Day too, huh? You know the words."

Lasko ignored his effort at diversion. "Papi told me the old one was the best. More grateful for the ol' whanger, ya know." He seized himself between the legs the way he had once seized Andy. "Her pussy's loose, but she's got some nice gams."

"Shut your trap, Lasko."

"What? I ain't said nothin' bad. I didn't call her nympho or nothin' . . . like some people do."

Andy walked slowly toward him. He tried his best to sound calm. "You know who she is, don't you?" It wasn't so much a question as a revelation, spoken aloud, so he could actually believe it himself.

"Sure." Lasko flicked his still-lit cigarette to the ground. "She's got a reputation."

“That’s not what I mean. She’s the friend who gave me the valise. You knew that, didn’t you, when you came? You remembered her name.”

Lasko snorted. “Wish I had me a prosty for a friend.”

Andy was so close now he could smell Lasko’s breath. “You stole from her, Lasko. That’s as low-down as it gets.”

Lasko gave him a curdled smile. “It’s not like she ain’t gettin’ her money back.” He grabbed himself again. “One night at a time.”

Andy’s hands shot out and seized Lasko’s shirtfront, curling it into his fists, yanking him closer.

“You stay away from her, you bastard!”

Lasko seemed too stunned to reply.

Andy shook him once, really hard, then shoved him away in disgust. Lasko stumbled backward, his knees finally buckling under him. His head hit the concrete base of the sign with a sound too soft not to be alarming. Andy saw blood on the side of his face, slick as the cover of a dime novel under the blue glare of the neon.

He’d had the last word. He must have cracked Lasko’s skull.

“Oh, God. . . . Lasko?”

Lasko didn’t answer, didn’t move. Andy could hear everything around him but Lasko: a car on the highway, a customer braying in the house, a dove cooing on top of Violet’s cabinette. Then, after an eternity, Lasko propped himself on an elbow and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to blot the side of his face. There was a long scrape there—a deep, ugly graze, but not as bad as Andy had feared.

“Let me help,” he said.

“Get away.”

“I just need to—”

“I’m warning you!”

Andy wondered if Lasko was about to lunge. All that pugilistic stuff, the fake fighting that he had found so endearing, could have held real fighting in its heart, a secret cruelty waiting to be unleashed. But Lasko just staggered to his feet, bloody handkerchief pressed to his head, and lurched toward the parking lot.

He was a fraud as a tough guy, a real impersonator. His cruelty was there all right, plain as day, but it was not contained in his fists.

Andy watched Lasko leave, watched until he climbed into a truck with MADRIGAL PLUMBING barely visible through the rust of the door. His father's truck. Andy heard an anguished squeal from a woman in the front seat.

Hegazti? Had his sister been waiting for him?

The truck pulled slowly out of the lot, passing Andy and the neon moon. Lasko leaned out of the window, still holding the handkerchief to his head.

"You better stay upstairs. Cuz I'm comin' back."

"No, you're not," Andy said quietly.

"Next week. She wants me to."

"No, she doesn't."

"Ask her. She can't get enough of me."

Andy was quiet for a moment. "Margaret," he said finally. "Her name is Margaret. You can't even say *her* name."

Lasko's lip curled. "Pussy don't need a name."

The truck pulled away. Lasko shouted his exit line out the window.

"Abyssinia!"

In those days, there was a law in Nevada decreeing that prostitutes could not work in counties where members of their family resided. It was a sensible law, Anna thought, one that had no doubt prevented a lot of accidental heartbreak, not to mention a few multiple murders. Andy had been exempt, however. Margaret might have been more mother to him than his own mother, but, having no legal offspring or relatives of her own in Humboldt County, this wheat-haired angel who had read him the Winnie-the-Pooh books was free to hurt anyone she pleased.

He stopped at the door of her cabinette. After a moment's hesitation, he entered without knocking. Margaret was standing there in her chenille bathrobe.

"Oh, lamb . . . you gave me a fright." She laughed at herself merrily. "You don't know what happened to my Lysol, do you?"

He didn't hear the question. He smelled Lasko's spunk, ripe in the air.

"That guy who was here—" he began.

"The Basque boy."

"Yes."

“He’s the one who hocked the valise. I lent it to him, and he hocked it.” His legs were trembling, so he clamped his hand on the doorjamb to make sure he could finish what he had to say. “He came here to get back at me . . . to hurt me.”

Margaret sat down on the edge of the bed, her knees pressed together, her face contorted in disbelieving empathy. “Why would he do that?”

Andy spoke directly to her summering Swedish eyes. “Because I wouldn’t be a boy with him.”

She blinked at him, uncomprehending.

“Because I wouldn’t do what boys do with each other in private.”

Margaret absorbed that for a moment, nodding slowly. “Oh . . . well . . . I guess that makes sense.”

“I liked him, but I couldn’t. I mean, I never . . . and I couldn’t. And now he thinks he has to prove he’s a man. He has to go out and get some . . . some . . .”

“Snatch,” said Margaret, nodding solemnly.

“Revenge.”

“Well . . . that too. Same difference.” She gave Andy a weary smile, then patted the bed, signaling him to sit down.

He remained standing. He could not let this be settled so easily. “Don’t you get it? I told him you’d given me the valise. He knew your name, so he came here and fucked you. That’s like fucking . . . I dunno . . . my mother or something.”

Margaret’s eyes went wide and watery. “Andy Ramsey, that’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me.” She found a hankie in the pocket of her bathrobe and dabbed at her eyes for a while. “Just the sweetest. Don’t go tellin’ Mother Mucca, though. It would hurt her feelings.”

“Who?”

Margaret nodded. “Ain’t that rich? Violet started calling her that. I’m doin’ it now myself. I ain’t takin’ her guff anymore.” She tucked the hankie away. “Listen, lamb, that boy may have it in for you—I don’t know—but his Papi placed the order with me personally. Said his son needed fixin’. Paid in advance, too. Plenty.”

Andy nodded. “Seventy-five dollars?”

Margaret drew back. “Now how in the blazes—”

Andy just glowered at her.

“That’s how much they got for the valise?”

“Bingo.”

Margaret’s shoulders were completely slumped, but she still managed to shrug them a little. “Oh well. What goes around comes around.”

Andy’s mind was elsewhere now. He was thinking about the plumbing truck in the parking lot, Hegazti waiting there, a reliable witness that Lasko had done the deed. The old man had been thorough. Fixing Lasko had been a family affair.

“You can’t let him come back,” he said.

“Oh, sweetheart. . . . We’ve already taken their money.”

Their money.

“And he’s not such a bad kid.”

Andy couldn’t believe his ears. “You should hear how he talks about you!”

Another what-the-hell shrug from Margaret. “You should hear how they *all* talk about me.” She studied him and his pain. “If it makes you feel any better . . . he wasn’t havin’ a real swell time. He’s just like you, lamb. I’m sure of it.”

“He’s *not* just like me! He’s stupid and vindictive and childish.”

“Well, not in that way maybe, but—”

“How can you stand it, Margaret?”

“What?”

“Men. Night after night. Putting up with their meanness.”

She fiddled with the cord of her bathrobe. “I like ’em, I guess.”

“Well, I don’t. I want my friends to be women when I get outta here. Men don’t even know who they are. They’re such cowards.”

“I reckon that’s true,” said Margaret with a sigh of resignation.

Andy finally sat down next to her. “Just don’t see him again.” He could feel tears scalding his cheeks. “Couldn’t you do that?”

“Oh, lamb.” She reached over and squeezed his hand. “You won’t even know when it happens. And it won’t mean nothin’, you know that. This boy’s a lost soul, and . . . I got so much mothering in me. Just like I got for you. You understand?”

He understood all too well. Sex had never been Margaret’s only gift to the world. She had a vast, promiscuous kindness that had made him jealous, in small ways, even as a child. There had never been anything like this,

though, nothing that had torn through his heart from the inside. She had let Lasko into the nest, and she wanted Andy to know it. He yanked his hand away from her, sprang to his feet.

“Andy, lamb, listen to me—”

But he was already out the door, heading for the house and ready for revenge.

In the parlor Mama was banging out a tune for the customers. It was easy enough to slip unnoticed into Mama’s office, where he grabbed one of her envelopes and a sheet of her fancy stationery—the one with a howling pink tomcat in a top hat. He took them up to his room, latched the door, and began, furiously, to write.

Dear Mr. Madrigal,

I am sorry to have to write such a letter, but I feel I must explain your son’s injury. He came by my establishment last night and made an indecent advance toward my son. My son is all man, and gave him what for. I will speak of this matter publicly if your son ever returns to the Blue Moon. He is not welcome here.

Sincerely,

MONA RAMSEY

P.S. I mean the sheriff!!

Letter in hand, Andy crept out of the house and into the truck. It took him twenty minutes to reach the Madrigals’ house. He knew there was a strong chance that Lasko had taken Hegazti directly home, so he waited in the shadows beneath the big lighted LOTHING sign and watched Lasko’s garage room for signs of activity. It was completely dark, so he crossed the backyard and went to the porch, where a mailbox and a door buzzer were all he needed to carry out his plan.

Only one had been strictly necessary, of course. Delivery would have been enough. They would have found the letter in the morning, and the message would have been conveyed. But Andy, in his pain and jealousy, wanted the satisfaction of being a *witness*. He wanted proof that he had

stood his ground and fought back like a man, that this story had not ended with Lasko's heartless "Abyssinia."

He opened the mailbox, slipped in the letter, rang the buzzer, and ran like crazy.

Breathless, he took refuge in the truck, which was hidden behind a stand of cottonwoods. It wouldn't matter anyway, if someone saw the truck, since it belonged to Mama, and that would only confirm the authenticity of the letter. Andy was banking on his belief that no one would contact Mama. There would be too much shame and dishonor involved. This would be a family matter conducted in private.

Someone opened the door and stepped onto the porch. Even from this distance Andy could hear the momentous squeak of the mailbox.

The first voice he heard was Hegazti's. "Papi," she was calling, "Papi!"

The porch creaked under the heavy tread of the man of the house. Hegazti was speaking to him in Spanish, presumably translating the letter.

It serves you right, thought Andy. You had your way with my family. I'll have my way with yours.

Mr. Madrigal's growl grew into a bellow. "Belasko! Belasko!"

Lasko answered feebly from somewhere inside the house.

That'll keep you away, thought Andy. That'll keep you away for good.

How right he had been.

The Temple Juno

A blue moon—the second full moon of the month—was rising over Black Rock City when Shawna set off on her own to look for Otto. She knew already he was part of the temple crew, so she made that her first destination, so she could praise him on his communal effort when she came to look for him at Seltzerville, the camp he shared with a dozen other street clowns. There was no way to do this but to do it. No phones, no tweets, nothing. Just this roulette of random souls, cycling through the watercolor twilight on their way from somewhere to somewhere else.

Once in a blue moon. As in rarely, but sometimes.

It was what she adored about Burning Man: the way one thing could lead you to another like an undertow. You threw yourself into it, and it took you from there, swirling you into moments so rich and rare that you could almost forget you had ever written LOL or OMG on someone's Twitter feed. Burning Man wasn't a link to life; it was life itself, immediate and astonishing. All those weeks of planning and ticket scrounging had led to this sweet release into the wild and woolly Now.

That's why it made sense to stop at the Hug Deli on her way to the Temple of Juno. Because it was *there*, this hand-painted sidewalk stand in the middle of nowhere, fake as can be yet completely archetypal, like something Wile E. Coyote would erect as a ruse for the Roadrunner. The menu at the Hug Deli included, among other items, the Warm and Fuzzy Hug, the Beverly Hills Air Kiss Hug, and the Gangsta Hug, with side orders of Pinch, Tickle, and Back Scratch. She ordered the Long Uncomfortable Hug, because she thought that was funny, thereby prompting a nut-brown Venice Beach-looking dude to hold on to her, earnestly pokerfaced, for a seeming eternity.

“Are you uncomfortable yet?”

“Fairly, yes.”

“Excellent. My work here is done.”

She laughed and mounted her bike, pedaling away from the zany mirage as her gratuitous hugger shouted “Namaste” in her direction.

Insemination should be so easy, she thought.

The spire of the Temple of Juno appeared in the dust as fragments of filigree, looming so high in the sky it could have been someone’s last hallucination. It felt Asian, but not entirely, with a courtyard that made it sprawl like a kingdom. It took ten minutes to reach, pedaling hard, so she needed a long swig on her canteen once she had chained her bike out front. There were dozens of others joining her, freed from their wheels and continuing their pilgrim’s progress toward the structure.

It was plywood, this temple, blond and raw up close but intricate as lace, a computer-hewn patchwork assembled by Otto and a multitude of others, people who had built something magnificent to be burned in a week on the premise that simple creation was its own joy, and everything, *everything*, must be released.

The more she thought about Otto, the more he seemed like the perfect guy to ask for sperm. He was strong and sober and kind. He’d been nice to her the night they ran into each other at Martuni’s. He had even joked about the two exes who had come later. She had let him down gently, after all, when he started getting serious, and that had been four whole years ago. He seemed to have let her go as thoroughly as he had let go of Sammy, his monkey puppet—minus the ritual cremation.

But the real bonus was the fact that he was moving to Ottawa in a month. (He liked the sound of Otto from Ottawa, he said, and it was easy to find eco work in Canada.) The sheer geographical distance would lessen the chance of him forming an emotional attachment to the child. And maybe he’d be totally cool with the idea, expecting nothing in return for his contribution. Seltzerville was an easy bike ride to Dusty Dames, where the insemination would be staged. Or held. Or whatever.

She hated all the language of this, the mechanics. She wanted to focus on the end result, so that one day she would be able to tell the apple of her eye that she had loved her/him long before he/she had even been a seed.

That she had dreamed of him/her in a place so profoundly infertile that life itself was imported for one magic week, and that love and art were the only intentions. Once pregnant, she would not (she swore) be one of those women who natter away about the future to their growing bellies, but she wouldn't mind having a word with the kid right now. She would tell her/him that the coast was clear, that it was beautiful here.

She flowed with the others into the temple, where beams of light slashed through the lacy walls like swords through a magician's cabinet. A great wooden pendulum—an inverted pyramid—swung almost imperceptibly above a mandala of humans arrayed beneath its point. Dust was the constant here, making everything velvety and sumptuous. The walls were covered with felt-tip scribbling that would have seemed defamatory without the knowledge that this was the soul of the space: poignant and pithy (or not so pithy) farewells to dead friends and old lovers, lost pets and bad vibes, anything that needed remembering and releasing through fire.

The people beneath the pendulum were in their own orbits of bliss or grief, which Shawna did not want to invade. Instead she made her way upstairs, reading the inscriptions that caught her eye, moved by the sheer accumulation of loss.

Grief-fiti. That's what it was.

She stopped on the landing and found a clear space on the wall, claiming it benignly with her presence, as she would a good spot on a beach. She was digging in her knapsack for a felt-tip marker when someone approached her with his own, presenting it to her with a courtly flourish. He was her age or thereabouts, and so coated in dust that the fabric-store fur of his Pan legs was indistinguishable from his own smooth flesh. His horns, in much the same way, merged with his head.

"Thanks," she said, "but I may be here for a while."

"Please," he said. "Keep it."

And with that he was gone—somewhat theatrically, but thrillingly just the same. She wondered if he had blessed her on the spur of the moment or if felt-tip markers were part of his official gifting. But even if he had a whole sack of those suckers stashed somewhere, it was a cool thing to do. It was good to give people things they needed. To be there for them in the moment. It showed you noticed.

She went to the wall and began to write in bright green ink:

Dear Connie Bradshaw,

We've met only once. You held me in your arms and looked into my eyes. I wish I could remember that. My friend Michael says you were kind and sort of daffy and liked guys a lot. I do, too. And gals, by the way. ☺ Something tells me we would get on great. I've heard what you went through to give me life, and I REALLY FUCKING APPRECIATE IT, CONNIE. I'm living for us both now.

Your daughter,
SHAWNA HAWKINS

P.S. Would you like to be a grandmother? Wouldn't that be fantabulous?

When she was finished, she left the temple and strolled around the courtyard. Night was falling swiftly. The lights in the temple made it glow like candlelight through old scrimshaw. She sat on one of the courtyard benches and wondered, idly, which parts of this otherworldly palace Otto had helped to build.

Juno, goddess of fertility and overseer of childbirth, protector of women and preserver of marriage.

Could there be a better place for her tonight?

She had been there for ten minutes before she noticed the writing on the wall behind her. It was rendered in the same green ink she had used for her own.

WANT TO BE A MOTHER? NEED SEED FROM A NICE GUY? THAT'S WHAT I'M GIFTING THIS YEAR. NO STRINGS ATTACHED. SEE NEXT BENCH.

It wasn't like her to blush, but the message felt so intuitive of her situation. She was like one of those starving wretches on *Survivor* getting a tree-mail message promising doughnuts and milk. She looked around the courtyard furtively—*guiltily*—to see if she was being watched. There were several dozen people there in the indigo gloaming, but none of them seemed especially interested in her.

The nearest bench was unoccupied, so she walked there and checked it out, using her pocket flashlight to examine the graffiti. Much of it was

written in green ink, so the color was obviously not exclusive to the faun in the temple. The marker might have been provided by the temple crew itself. The anonymous benefactor could be anyone at all. Anyone.

His handwriting, however, was instantly recognizable from the other bench: loopy letters with open O's. This time he had written:

HEALTHY EX-MORMON RESPECTS ALL WOMEN. NO CONTACT DESIRED. TOP TIER OF
TEMPLE, PLAYA SIDE. INFO UNDER RAIL. LOOK 4 HEART. PROMISE NEVER TO SEE
YOU AGAIN.

Three minutes later, as she headed back to the temple, she thought, It's a good thing I'm not fucked up. It's a good thing this is my first e-less unmollyfied Burn in . . . well . . . ever. Otherwise, I might invest this moment with something falsely mystical, something beyond the lark of a treasure hunt in the desert. I might see it as a viable option, too, a natural progression of the Hug Deli, a great big why-the-hell-not.

She knew better than that. Especially sober. Otto would almost certainly end up being her go-to guy, because sperm was not a fast food proposition.

Except of course, that it *was*. What else was it if not that? It was always a thing of the moment, best served warm. And anonymity had certain advantages in this situation. Someday soon she would have a spouse, someone under the same roof who would love the Kid as deeply as she did. Why burden that person with a third person—some long-gone retired street clown boyfriend in Canada, for instance? It muddled things unnecessarily. Ben would never have been a problem in that regard, since he was already part of the package, already inextricable from her life.

What the hell was she talking about? *Yes, a very good thing you aren't fucked up tonight, missy.*

Reaching the mezzanine of the temple, she followed the railing until—yes!—she found a plain green heart without an inscription. It was almost too easy, this game. She sank to her butt on the spot and used her flashlight to inspect the underside. She found a smattering of words there. Green capital letters. *Eureka.*

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
CAMP COINKYDINK
5:30 AND JASMINE
ASK FOR DUSTPUPPY

Here was the thing:

She didn't have to see Otto right away. She didn't have to see him at all, in fact, since he didn't even know she was coming. You couldn't break a date that had never been made, could you? She could tell him tomorrow how much she admired and respected his work on the temple. Tonight there was curiosity to be satisfied. Maybe—just maybe—there was a fourth option, beyond Ben and Caleb and Otto.

Camp Coinkydink was out toward the scattered edge of things. As Shawna pedaled across the gleaming playa under a silver-dollar moon, she remembered something Mrs. Madrigal used to say:

“Your regrets, my dear, are all about the things you *didn't* do.”

Hazard of the Profession

Anna waited on a circular settee in the lobby of the Blue Moon Family Fun Center and Casino. An enormous arrangement of roses (artificial but convincing until she touched them) erupted volcanically from the center of the settee. She smiled at this effort—the wrongheadedness of it—since cut flowers had not been allowed in the original Blue Moon. Mama had very few superstitions (not even the acceptable Catholic ones), but she had clung to the orthodoxy of her profession. Cut flowers were seen as omens of death in a brothel, emblematic of beauty cut down in its prime. You did not bring roses to the girls without catching hell from Mama.

Brian and Wren were talking to a young woman at the counter. Behind them, in a room with a glass wall, children were frolicking in a pit of brightly colored balls. Their muffled squeals merged with the bells and whistles of the one-armed bandits in another room. Innocence and adult pleasures were efficiently segregated here.

Not like the old days at all.

She remembered the afternoon when she finally felt remorse for having written the letter to Lasko's father.

Andy had driven over to Eagle Drugs with an apology already forming in his head, somehow believing—a full week after the fact—that he could fix things with a kind word to Lasko or a confession to his father.

I should have brought pastries, he had thought. Or a pack of Camels.

He hated to think how Lasko might have suffered because of his offhanded wickedness. Lasko's banishment to the garage could have already assumed a dreadful new coloration—beatings, humiliation, who-knows-what. A man who had ordered his son to be “fixed” by a prostitute was capable of much more than that.

Andy had known there was little chance of finding Lasko at the drugstore—his father had no doubt removed him from public scrutiny—but he had gone to the Rexall in the hope that a conversation with Lasko would prove more benign in the presence of his boss, the even-tempered and professional Mr. Yee.

Mr. Yee, however, had been in a state when Andy arrived, muttering to himself as he swept shards of glass from the checkered linoleum floor.

The pharmacy had been robbed that morning, the old man said with a scowl. Some hooligan had broken the window and stolen pills from the cabinet.

“What sort of pills?” Andy had asked, suddenly sick with panic.

“Barbiturates!”

“What’s that?”

“Sleeping pills . . . Sorry sonofabitch!” Mr. Yee, still sweeping furiously, saw Andy’s stricken expression and collected himself long enough to offer reassurance. “Not your fault, son. If you see your buddy Lasko, tell him I need help pronto.”

But it is my fault, thought Andy as he raced through back streets and alleys toward the hideous truth that he already knew.

It’s nobody’s fault but my own.

He was thinking that as he reached Lasko’s garage.

As he entered that dim, dirt-floored room and smelled the rancid vomit and saw the body slumped like a sack of potatoes.

As he looked at that face, already gray and waxen with death.

As he choked down his sobs to keep from being heard in the house.

As he spotted the *Book of Marvels* and snatched the incriminating evidence from the shelf above the bed.

As he sped across the bridge toward the Blue Moon Lodge and the soft consolation of Margaret’s arms.

There had never been a moment when he wasn’t thinking it.

It’s nobody’s fault but my own.

Brian and Wren were striding toward Anna, both of them smiling, apparently successful in their search for Mr. Sudden. An ember of shame lodged in Anna’s chest was searing its way to the light of day—or the light, at any rate, of a ridiculous theme park where whorehouses were fun for the

whole family. It had not been fun, God knows, but it had not been like this place. There had been life at the Blue Moon, however lurid or dull, and there had been radio romance and a long-lashed boy who danced in pirate pants and probably loved her for a while. It might have been fine with no more than that had she not been so vindictive, so childishly selfish.

She had to ask herself if she was still being selfish. This last-minute quest for peace of mind could easily wreak havoc on an innocent, someone nearly as old as she who might not welcome—not to mention deserve—this antediluvian drama. It was far too late for confession, really; the confessors had all left the building.

“He’s in the back,” said Brian, “on his coffee break.”

Wren extended her arm. “C’mon. He’s expecting us.”

Anna found herself frozen to the spot.

“Oh,” said Brian. “Maybe you’d rather do this alone?”

“Forget that shit,” said Wren. “She needs us.”

“Do you?”

“I do, yes. I don’t want to explain this a second time.” She took Wren’s arm. “I’m sorry I’ve been so vague, dear. It’s all a bit of a rat-fuck, I’m afraid.”

They made their way to an undecorated room where Mr. Oliver Sudden was seated at a folding table with his red plastic cup of coffee. He was a wiry fellow with a handlebar mustache—apparently real, if overly waxed—and the obligatory striped shirt and sassy arm garters of the casino’s male employees. Seventy-five, she guessed. An extrovert built for greeting the public, aware of his roguishness.

He rose the moment he saw her inadequate locomotion.

“Here, sweetheart, let me help.”

“Keep your seat,” she said. “These two have it covered.”

He scrambled toward a cluster of upholstered furniture at the other end of the room. “Bring her over here then. It’s more comfortable.”

Brian and Wren lowered her into an armchair, but not before her capricious old body had chirped out the tiniest fart.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “Can’t take her anywhere.”

“Didn’t hear a thing,” he said. “Sit down, folks, please.” He motioned Wren and Brian toward a plaid sofa, then turned back to Anna. “Did that just yesterday, by the way. In front of a lady from Texas.”

“Oh well,” Anna said with a dismissive wave. “Texas.”

He chuckled and sat down on the arm of the chair next to her. “I hear you got some questions for me.”

“I may be barking up the wrong tree.”

“Bark away. That’s what I do all day. Answer questions. ’Course mostly it’s about where the bathrooms are.”

She smiled. She liked this man.

“I’m wondering,” she said, “if you used to work at the old Blue Moon. The one that was a brothel.”

His mouth fell open in wonderment, exposing shiny white dentures. He grabbed the curl of his mustache as if it were the only way to close his mouth.

“Now how the hell did you know that?”

“My daughter met you. Back in the seventies. She remembered the name. Said you did chores around the place. Handyman work. We talked about you before she died.”

Mr. Sudden’s brow furrowed. “I’m truly sorry to hear that. Your children aren’t supposed to go before you do.”

She gave him a forgiving smile. “They say that, don’t they? But it’s not true. Children do it all the time.”

Anna could see that afternoon so clearly. Nineteen ninety-nine. The crumbling folly on the mound above the manor house. The aching green of the Cotswold hills. The ragged chaise where Mona had held court above her kingdom, pale as a powdered queen.

There was tactful hesitation from Mr. Sudden. “I don’t understand. Was your daughter . . . one of the ladies at the Blue Moon?”

“No . . . but she worked there for several weeks. Answering phones. I don’t think she even used her real name.”

He nodded sympathetically but without recognition.

“Red hair? Very frizzy. Like they wore it back then.”

He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to remember.”

“I’m surprised she remembered me.”

“I think it was the name, to be honest. It doesn’t let you forget it.”

A blinding flash of Clark Gable teeth. “I was a late baby. My mother wasn’t expecting me. Her last name was Sudden, so . . . how could she

resist?”

She studied him for a moment, assessing the kind placement of his features and something deeper and darker in those wide-spaced eyes.

“Margaret,” she said softly, as if it were a prayer.

He was understandably flummoxed. “What?”

“Your mother’s name was Margaret Sudden.”

His hand went to his mustache and held on for dear life. “You knew her?”

“I did, yes.” A slight nod was all it took to jar the tears from her eyes.

Which made her cross with herself. This was supposed to be *his* moment, not hers.

“I grew up at the Blue Moon Lodge,” she added. She found a tissue in her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. “Your mother read me the Winnie-the-Pooh books. She made me a dress for my sixteenth birthday. I loved her a great deal. More than I loved my mother, in fact.”

His head tilted as he squinted at her. “Should I be remembering you?”

“No, no.” She tucked away the tissue. “It was before your time. If you don’t mind my asking, what year were you born?”

“Nineteen thirty-seven.”

“Yes . . . before . . . just barely.”

“So . . . you grew up there? How do you do that?”

“Happily, for the most part.”

He smiled. “I meant—”

“My mother ran the joint. Mona Ramsey?”

He gaped at her. “Holy shit! *Mother Mucca*?” His eyes dropped in penitence. “Sorry. Meant no disrespect.”

“None taken, dear. I know they called her that after I left. She was a tough old coot, wasn’t she?”

“She was just a businesswoman,” he said.

Anna smiled at him. “I suspect you and I scrubbed some of the same toilets.”

He seemed to muse on that for a moment. She could practically hear the wheels turning in his head before he finally spoke:

“You’re the daughter who ran away! Ma told me about you!”

“Did she?” Anna could easily have corrected him, but she didn’t think it generous under the circumstances. There was too much left to share with

this indulgent stranger. Besides, she was touched by Margaret's early alteration of Andy's gender. Margaret had known Anna well before Anna had become Anna, and apparently she had honored that reality after Andy fled town.

"Did she tell you what happened?"

A quick shake of his head. "Just that . . . you ran away. And nobody knew where you went. She was pretty broke up about it."

Damn you, tears. Stay away.

She glanced over at Brian and Wren, who were watching this interrogation with increasing fascination. She gave them a faint conspiratorial smile before addressing Mr. Sudden again. "Did you grow up at the Blue Moon yourself?"

"Oh, no. Ma left as soon as she got pregnant. I grew up in Portland. Had a wife and kid, but . . . they left after a while. A little problem with speed." He tapped those brazen white dentures. "I moved back here after Ma died in the seventies."

"And why—if you don't mind—did you do that?"

He shrugged. "Guess I wanted to see where we came from."

"And my mother gave you a job."

He nodded. "Part-time, but . . . she was a good egg. I was a train wreck back then. Musta been when your daughter met me."

"Most certainly," said Anna.

There was a tidy silence as she tried to compose the next question. She had already seen what she needed in the molten eddies of his eyes, an ancestral *something* that summoned her former life like no landmark could ever have done.

"Did your mother . . . did she ever talk to you about your father?"

He shook his head with a melancholy little smile, as if the answer were obvious. "I don't think she ever knew. Hazard of the profession."

"Mmm . . . but she was very careful most of the time."

"You knew her that well, eh?"

This was no time to bring up Lysol, but that's what Anna had on her mind. The foolproof yellow potion that kept babies at bay. The stuff Andy had used to clean chicken guts off the wall of Delphine's cabinette the night that Margaret was bedding Lasko for the sake of his manhood. It didn't

have to have happened that night, but it could have, since Andy had taken the Lysol from Margaret's cabinet.

"I think I knew your father," she told Oliver Sudden.

He just widened his eyes dubiously, so she continued.

"He was just a teenager, and he took his own life. I have plenty of reason to feel guilty about that, and I would very much like to apologize to someone before I die. I'm afraid you're the most logical candidate, because . . . well . . . you're alive. That's just the way it is, I'm terribly sorry. May we take you to dinner, Mr. Sudden?"

He blinked at her, then turned to Brian. "Is she always like this?"

"You have no idea," said Brian.

Candystriper

The Monarch was being a pain in the ass. It had worked perfectly before they dismantled it in Oakland, so the fuck-up had obviously happened on Jake's watch, during the reassembly in Black Rock City, something to do with the exposed gears and the dust. The beeotch had been wobbling all over the proving ground at Trans Bay, shaming the fuck out of him. He was glad that he was so high up (in the Pod Formerly Known as Anna's) that no one, not even Amos, could see him blushing.

"It's veering to the right now," he hollered.

"I know," said Amos with a note of strained patience in his voice. He was manning the left pod, one of three connected to the wheels. He was also in charge of the wings, which had just proven unflappable in the worst sense of the word.

"We can't take this out on the playa," Jake groaned. "We look like a wounded duck limping into the reeds."

Amos knew better than to agree with him. "It must be fixable. Let's have Incandescence take a look." Incandescence was the Burn name of Lisa Gelb, the asshat in the right pod. Nobody liked using that stupid name, since it made you slow down for it, just the way she did. She had been a sergeant in the army before her transition, and she wanted your attention all the time.

In-can-des-cence. Hup-two-three-four.

Amos was obviously enjoying himself, using Lisa to goad Jake out of his funk. Jake didn't feel like being goaded out of anything right now. This overgrown tricycle had lost its reason to live even before it got here. He had not made it to hold a poster of Anna. He had made it to hold Anna. He had made it to give her wings.

Now the Monarch itself seemed to sense that the game was over.

Lisa was looking up at him expectantly. “Lemme at it, dude,” she said. “I think I know how to fix it.”

Of course you do. And if you don’t, you’ll make some shit up.

Jake hopped out of his pod and monkeyed down to the ground. “Have at it, Incandescence. She’s all yours. I’m through with this shit.”

“You leave it to me, little feller.”

This was provocation, pure and simple, but before Jake had a chance to respond, Amos had taken Jake by the arm and led him away from the scene.

“Why are you being such a dick?”

“Me? Did you hear what she called me?”

“She’s pissed. You haven’t let her anywhere near the Monarch since we got here. What harm can it do to let her have a shot at it?”

“You watch. She’ll take total credit for it for the rest of the week. She’ll act like she saved the day.”

“There are worse things that could happen.” Amos raised his brows knowingly, irritatingly.

“Like what?” asked Jake. “Being spared a lot of blank stares on the playa?”

“C’mon. Who cares?”

“It won’t work without Anna here.”

Amos shot him a WTF look.

“Not the machinery—the whole concept. That poster makes it look like a friggin’ memorial or something. Like a Chinese funeral procession.”

Amos chortled. “It would be working fine if it were Chinese.”

“You blame me, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t give a shit, personally.”

“You’re judging me about something.”

“Well, I think you’re kinda being a man about machinery.”

“Is that right?”

“Yep. Can’t relate, sorry. It’s like a bad NASCAR movie. If you want that kind of butch, you’ll have to find another cis queer.”

He felt the beginnings of a smile, so he crimped it into a smirk.

“Let’s go to Center Camp,” said Amos. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

Burning Man's commitment to gifting and radical self-reliance dictated that only two items were available for purchase in Black Rock City: ice and coffee. Jake enjoyed both nods to corrosive capitalism in the form of a large iced soy latte in the big tent at Center Camp. Then he and Amos cuddled up on a lumpy beanbag angled toward one of the performance spaces. The beanbag was what had attracted them, not the zoned-out guy on stage reading from a stack of papers. If not for his ponytail and Utilikilt, he might have been Christopher Lloyd in *Back to the Future*. His audience was skimpy and scattered, but they gave him their attention, hooting and clapping whenever he stopped long enough to signal that a response would be appropriate.

Amos frowned. "Do you think that whole thing's a poem?"

"Sounds like it. About GMOs."

"Oh, you mean like—"

"Yeah, genetically modified . . . whatever."

"Organisms."

"Right."

They were silent while the guy on stage droned on. *I spit on your alien corn. I curse your zombie wheat, your amber waves of evil . . .*

Finally Jake said, "It was smart of them to put the poetry next to the caffeine."

Amos chuckled and pulled Jake closer. "Feeling better?"

Jake conceded that he might be, that coffee worked miracles.

"You know," said Amos, "if Anna were here—"

"—it would be totally fucked. I know."

"Well—not that bad, but . . . she'd be feeling bad for you . . . and you would be feeling guilty. For no good reason. So—you've been spared all that."

"The sucky part," said Jake, "is that Marguerite and Selina get to be right."

Amos hesitated. "They don't have to know that."

"No?"

"Fuck no."

The guy on stage had become louder and more singsongy. He had begun to chant, in fact.

Canto, Monsanto, canto, Monsanto.

“What does canto mean?” Jake asked.

“It’s a verse in an epic poem.”

“A long one, in other words.”

“Look at that stack of paper, Jakey.”

“Let’s just wander away casually the next time they clap. We don’t want to insult him. He’s only got eight people listening.”

“You think he’s noticed?” Amos stood up, dusting off his butt. “C’mon. I’ve got some Mormon underwear you gotta take a look at.”

That did not happen right away. They had errands to run before dark, and the last thing Jake wanted was to come back early and find Lisa—*fuck Incandescence*—still grunting away over the Monarch, telling anyone who’d listen how fucked up the reassembly had been. So they headed off to Arctica, one of the two camps where ice was sold, to buy cubes for their evening cocktails. A lean silver-haired woman of sixty or so was whaling away with an ice pick, her back turned to them. Jake should have recognized her—he *would* have, anywhere back in the city—but here she was completely out of context. The pigtails threw him too. And the pink-and-white-striped dress. The whole getup, really.

“Jake! It’s Mary Ann!”

“Oh, hi.” He laughed and hugged her awkwardly across the counter. “You look so much like . . . Dorothy, right? I didn’t even—”

“I’m a candystriper, actually.” She swept her fingers along the edge of her dress as if that would explain everything.

Jake shrugged. “Sorry. You know I suck at the femme stuff.” He was rocking from foot to foot, nervously aware that it was his turn to introduce Amos. What would he call him with someone new? Was it too early for boyfriend?

“This is Amos Karpel.” He made a feeble hand-wobbling gesture between them. “Mary Ann Singleton.”

Amos gave her a sleepy smile. “I’m trying to make the connection between the uniform and the ice.”

“Oh . . . well . . . there is none. I just work Arctica for the hoot of it. People are always so glad to see you. Mostly though I work the night shift at the medical tent.” She arched a well-penciled eyebrow. “Totally

untrained. Hence Candystriper.” She wiggled a silver pigtail at him. “My playa name. World’s oldest teen volunteer.”

Amos smiled. “So what do you do?”

She shrugged. “Clean ’em up. Talk ’em down. Whatever the doctors want. There’s a lot of dehydration and puncture wounds. You’d be surprised how many people step on rebar. I’m always saying ‘gross,’ which doesn’t help a whole lot. I have to pretend that Candystriper said it in character, not me.” She tilted her head in acknowledgment of her silliness. “Don’t worry. Jake will explain me later. It’s lovely to meet you, Amos. You’re very cute. How many bags, gentlemen?”

They ordered four bags, all they could fit in their bike trailer. “We can give one to Lisa,” said Amos, “if things work out with . . . the Monarch.”

Jake gave him a withering look.

Mary Ann glanced between the two of them. “Is there royalty here or something?” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “I’m very discreet. That’s the way it’s done. Anne Hathaway was here last year, and she just—walked amongst us.”

“The Monarch is an art car,” Amos explained. “A Monarch butterfly.”

“Oh . . . of course . . . wow . . . like down in Pacific Grove. That’s sounds amazing.”

“We made it for Anna.” It tumbled out of him just like that. He wanted Mary Ann to know. She went way back with Anna, and she would get it.

“*Is she here?*” She sounded more aghast than excited.

“No, it’s just . . . a tribute.”

“Oh—well . . . that’s good. This would be a little rough on her.”

“That’s what everybody keeps saying.”

Mary Ann loaded two bags of ice onto the counter. While Amos was transferring them to the trailer, she made a hasty hand signal to Jake that asked, *Are you two an item?* Jake reddened on the spot, and the exchange was not lost on Amos.

“We’d better be,” he told her, grinning.

“Well, let me tell you something.” Mary Ann put her hand on Jake’s shoulder. It was chilly from the ice and felt good. “This is one of the finest men I’ve ever met.”

“Mary Aaann,” said Jake, sounding, even to his own ears, like a kid saying “Mooom.”

“Shut up, Jake. I’m saying this.” Her hand remained on his shoulder. “This man literally saved my life.”

“I did not literally save your life.”

“Okay then—my sanity. It was the worst moment of my life, and Jake was there—so there—being kind and strong and comforting.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Amos.

There was no way to change the subject but do it himself. “So what are you doing here? I mean, it doesn’t seem like your sort of—”

Mary Ann drew back in mock indignation. “What? I don’t look like Burning Man material?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have—”

She laughed, cutting him off. “DeDe and D’or and I are doing a plug and play, so just shoot me now. We’re the Ladies of Woodside. That’s what the Candystriper thing is all about. I’m doing penance for my luxury. And I should be, believe me.”

“Nice RV?”

“Huge. Oh my God.”

“How huge?”

“Reba McIntyre huge. You guys should come over. Hang out. Take a shower.” She gave him a wicked look. “I won’t tell. Your radical self-reliance is safe with me.” She leaned into him, as if she were about to offer him drugs. “A sit-down barbecue with cornbread and coleslaw and chocolate cake. And showers.”

Amos’s face was hard for Jake to read. Was he charmed by her energy or slightly repelled by it? “Get thee behind me,” he said, smiling.

She threw another bag on the counter. “I wasn’t going for Satan.”

He laughed. “Nowhere close.”

“There’s no virtue in missing out,” she said.

A long, confusing silence hung in the air.

Jake jumped into the breach. “Anna’s been loving the Volcano.”

“Oh . . . good. It’s not too much for her to manage?”

“Well . . . I do that for her.”

“Of course. That’s so sweet.”

“Not that often, but . . . sometimes before bed.”

Mary Ann smiled at him wistfully, sharing Mrs. Madrigal for a moment, then shooed them both away “Go! Make delicious cocktails! There’s a line

here!”

As Jake and Amos left with their wagons, Mary Ann hollered a final imperative. “And marry him, Amos . . . if you get half the chance.”

Do you hate her?” Jake asked as they unloaded the ice back at Trans Bay.

Amos thought for a moment. “I sort of *don’t*.”

“Yeah—me too.”

“How did you save her life . . . or whatever?”

“Do you remember that shed I showed you at Michael’s house?”

“Where the old guy killed himself?”

“Yep. . . . She was with him.”

“What?”

“He shot himself in front of her. I showed up a few minutes later. All I did was call the police and let her cry on me. I guess it was kind of a bonding moment.”

“I would say . . . yeah.”

“That and our hysterectomies.”

Amos remained unruffled. “She had one too? Not for the same reason, I take it.”

“Hers was for cancer. Just a few months before mine. She spent some time with me in the hospital. I’ve never forgotten it.”

“Then *I* won’t,” said Amos, giving him a tender look.

The Mormon underwear made its debut as soon as night fell. Amos came slouching through the tent flap, his chest hair spilling from the scooped neckline, his circumcised cock straining parabolically against the thin polyester blend of the fly.

“Excuse me, sir. May I speak with the lady of the house?”

Jake told him he must have the wrong house.

“Okay, then, what am I supposed to say?”

“In the first place, they’re not in their underwear when they come to the door. Or *just* their underwear, anyway.”

“So what did this guy say? The one who used to sit on your lap in his underwear?”

“I don’t remember. Just be yourself, Amos.”

Regrouping, Amos shook out his arms like a runner before a marathon. Then he grabbed his cock and snarled out his words backwoods style.

“I spit on your alien corn,” he said. “I curse your zombie alfalfa, your amber waves of . . . whatever.”

Jake laughed and threw a sneaker at him.

Life After Me

Michael and Ben had done molly twice in the course of their eight years together. One time during a hike in Pinyon City, the other during a Norah Jones concert in Golden Gate Park. It was a snuggly drug, like the old ecstasy, which had once carried a warning label about impromptu elopement while under the influence. The *new* ecstasy, on the other hand, was laced with speed—or so they had heard—so it was vital to obtain pure MDMA if you had any interest whatsoever in avoiding tooth loss and eventual madness. Ben knew a guy who knew a guy, so they ended up with several doses of molly for the trip to Black Rock City. One of them they would take on the night of the temple burn (a more spiritual experience, Ben said, than the actual burning of the Man); the other they were taking tonight at Comfort and Joy.

You could spot this camp from almost any place in the “gayborhood.” Silky pink and orange banners—the colors of a desert sunset—streamed from poles around the perimeter of the village. It felt medieval, but not the granite-dark, ominous medieval of *Game of Thrones*—more like the Necco-colored fairy scenes in *True Blood*. This *was* a fairy scene, come to think of it—or rather a faerie scene—so it seemed to Michael as welcoming a place as any to wait for the molly to come on. He was not quite a faerie—just as he was not quite a bear and, in his distant, slim-hipped 501 youth, not quite a clone—but he liked the gentle energy of faeries. They had lots of sofas, too, here at Comfort and Joy. That was a big plus.

“Is that the orgy tent?”

Ben shrugged. “That’s not quite the word for it. It’s really laid-back and mellow. A lot of cuddling. Like the club in *Shortbus*.”

“As I recall, the people in that were fucking their brains out.”

Ben rolled his head over and smiled at him. "You don't have to go in. We don't have to. We can stay right here on the sofa."

"For a while, at least, okay?"

"Of course."

Silly old coot! Michael had been in hundreds of sex spaces over the course of his adult life. Thousands, maybe, if he counted glory holes and Lands End and back rooms and the woods along Wohler Creek and Dick Dock in P-town and the Warm Sands resorts of Palm Springs and, okay fine, the men's room at Penn Station one sultry midnight in the late 1970s. It had been as easy as falling off a log. Or falling onto one, as the case may be. So what was so different now?

You are old, Mr. Mouse. Nobody wants to see you doing it. And if they do see you, you'll be met with rolling eyes and wrinkled noses.

If he were to express this to Ben, he would receive a reprimand, since Ben still found some fun in this body and wanted no part of Michael's sporadic self-loathing. But this tent, for some reason, filled him with irrational fear. It felt like the end of something, the whimper instead of the bang. It was as daunting as his very first gay outing when he climbed the stairs to the Rendezvous on Sutter Street to confront the unimaginable sight of male couples slow-dancing to Streisand.

How many more shots did he have at this? With Ben even? With anybody?

"Look!" cried Ben. "Let's try that!"

It was an open-air walkway hung with silvery Mylar streamers. A simple concept, but one that enchanted as soon as you were in the midst of it.

That was still the trick, wasn't it? *Just jump into it, babycakes.*

"Woohoo," said Michael, turning around for the return flight through the streamers.

Ben laughed. "Did I hear a woohoo?"

"Must've been somebody else," said Michael.

Back on the sofa now. An indigo dusk. A breeze tickling the pastel banners. Ben slumped against him, still shirtless and warm. A palpable unwinding.

"You feeling it?"

"Oh, yeah," said Michael.

“Nice, huh?”

“Mmm.” He kissed the side of Ben’s head. “Let’s just live here.”

“We couldn’t have Roman here.”

“Oh, fuck, you’re right.”

“What good is a city without dogs? It’s doomed to be temporary.”

“So right.”

“He would love it though. All these funky crotches to sniff.”

“I hope the Dood is happy with the new dogsitter,” said Ben.

They let time pass between them like a breeze.

“I’ve been so selfish,” Michael said after a while.

“About what?”

“The whole baby thing. I wasn’t being honest with you. I wasn’t grossed out by the idea of you helping Shawna out. I was just scared.”

“Of what?”

“Oh . . . people making plans for a future I won’t be part of . . . the whole idea of Life After Me.”

“There is no life after you,” said Ben.

“Well, that’s what I think, but the universe may have different ideas.”

Ben chuckled.

“It took so long to find you, Ben, and now I don’t want it to change. I want it all set in amber. I want us and nobody else in the most selfish way you can possibly imagine. I can’t help it—I’m old-fashioned. I believe marriage is between a man and a man. And if there’s a baby to be taken care of—frankly—I want it to be me.”

Ben said nothing.

“You see?” said Michael. “Selfish. Even a little creepy.”

Ben pulled him closer. “I understand, though. I might be the same way.”

“If you were old?”

“Yes.”

Michael tweaked Ben’s nipple. “I’m not *that* old.”

“But, sure . . . I think of life after you . . . I do.”

“Of course you do. You’d have to. Who wouldn’t?” He paused. “What do you think of exactly?”

“Oh . . . living in Europe maybe.”

Michael saw it: Ben selling his armoires in some trendy Roman neighborhood. Trastevere, say, or near the Piazza Navona. Ben’s sandy hair

flecked with a gray that matched his eyes. Ben going home on a Vespa to a roof terrace and a man.

“What would he be like?”

“Who knows? Somebody younger, maybe.”

“Younger than me?”

Ben chortled. “Younger than me, doofus.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I dunno. Because I haven’t before? Because you’ve shown me it’s possible?”

“Well . . . thank you . . . but that wasn’t my intention.”

Ben gave Michael’s leg a shake.

“The young can be difficult,” Michael added.

“So I’ve heard.”

“And Rome is expensive.”

“Who said anything about Rome?”

“Holy shit, those flags are beautiful,” said Michael. “Just rippling across the sky like—what?—sorbet and cream?”

“I’ll be there, Michael.”

“What?”

“I will be with you. I’m here with you now, and I will be with you then.”

Michael hesitated. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Yes, it is. How many times do I have to marry you before you get it?”

He leaned and kissed Michael.

“Is this the drugs talking?” asked Michael.

“No. But the drugs are asking the questions.”

Michael chuckled. “We could do it in Ohio now.”

“What?”

“Get married.”

“Do you really want to get married in Ohio?”

“Not especially, no. I just want to Be. Here. Now.”

Ben laughed. “Good. Call Shawna. She’ll be so happy.”

“We can’t call her. We can’t call anyone.”

“That’s right.”

“I *am* here now.”

“You are. And so is he.”

Ben was pointing toward a buff and nearly naked youth prancing past their semicircle of sofas. “ ‘Evening of the Faun,’ ” said Ben.

The guy had goat horns sprouting from a mop of blond hair. His legs were trousered with some sort of faux fur through which an actual penis was spiking heroically. It wasn’t huge, but it was finely formed and completely stole the show.

The guy pranced closer and stopped.

“Greetings,” he said.

“Greetings,” they replied, almost in unison.

“Do you mind?” He was asking to sit down.

“No . . . sure . . . of course.” They shimmied apart to let him sink onto the sofa between them.

The faun pulled a goatskin wine bag from around his neck and guzzled from it before offering it first to Michael, then to Ben.

Seeing their hesitation, he said, “It’s water.”

They both accepted swigs and returned the bag.

“You can hold it if you want.”

He meant his cock. Michael glanced at Ben and grinned.

Shrugging, Ben seized the guy’s cock at the balls and squeezed it.

“Nice,” he said.

“Thanks.” The faun turned to Michael. “Your turn, Daddy.”

Michael obliged him—because . . . why the hell not? The shaft was warm and roped with veins, a fistful of life.

Another endorsement seemed redundant, so Michael said, “I used to have a pair of those.”

The faun gave him a clumsy, boyish leer. “Bet you still do.”

“No.” Michael laughed. “The pants, I mean. I had a whole Pan outfit. Long time ago.”

“No shit?”

“Home Yardage. Mock chinchilla.” He was still holding the guy’s cock, having just noted that it was markedly thicker at the base. “I never thought of this, though. The open-air thing. I guess because I had to ride a cable car to the party.”

The faun giggled, but that’s the way it had happened.

Mary Ann had sent him on his way that night. Squeaky clean out of Cleveland, she had already begun to accept his brand-new randiness as if it

were her own. “Go find a nice billy goat,” she had told him with a playful shove, and in some ways that was the version of her he still maintained, the smart girl creeping up on adventure with one eye covered, not the liberal rich lady from Woodside taking Zumba lessons at the Zen Center. He had come to like the latter-day Mary Ann, but never with the intimacy of old. She probably felt the same about him—that stodgy old queen fussing in his garden, holed up with his younger husband in the Castro.

“Those are nice, too,” said Michael, letting go of the cock to touch the guy’s horns. “Did you make those as well?”

“No,” said the faun with a grin. “Those are real.”

Immaculate Conception

On her way to Coinkydink, Shawna stopped at an installation that had caught her eye from a distance. It reminded her of one of those carnival Tilt-a-Whirls, a slanted spinning disk that held its contents by centrifugal force. In this case, though, the contents were not people but little bonfires that scattered sparks as they orbited through the night sky. It was a simple concept—all iron and fire—and its operation was even simpler: two people on the ground alternately throwing muscle into a giant crank. Two people, it suggested, could do wondrous things working together.

Was she totally out of her mind, chasing down a stranger who had lured her with graffiti and promised to disappear? Had this offer of no-strings-attached sperm so caught her fertile imagination that it had destroyed her ability to reason?

She stood for a while and watched the whirling embers, partially to absorb their magic, partially seeking postponement of potential folly.

That was when Otto appeared.

“Well, hello, ladylove.”

He had called her that back in the day. Ladylove. It had bothered her with its faintly sexist overtones and corny echoes of his stint at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire. Tonight, however, she found it curiously reassuring. Go figure.

“Oh, hi,” she said. “I was just heading to Seltzerville.”

“To see *me*?”

“No. Ronald McDonald.” It was a nervous response, but it came off a little snide, so she added: “I wanted to tell you how amazing the temple is, Otto. Really. Just stunning. You guys did an amazing job. Seriously. It’s the best one ever.”

He pressed his hands together and touched his fingertips to his red rubber clown nose. She thought for a moment that he was going to say “Namaste,” and was hugely relieved when he didn’t. She could not have suppressed the laugh.

He turned and looked at the flaming Tilt-a-Whirl. “This is unbelievable, right?”

“Truly,” she said. “So primal and . . . elemental.” She scrounged for something else to say. “So how’s Ottawa coming along?”

He shrugged. “I’m still going.”

“Well, that’s good. I mean . . . I know how much you want to.”

He nodded. A long silence followed.

“Do you think we could talk for a bit?” she said finally.

“Sure. What about?”

“Just . . . things. I’d like to get your take on something.”

“You wanna go to Seltzerville? It’s not far.”

“Perfect.”

Otto looked genuinely pleased. “We can kick back. Drink some tea. Ada makes a smokin’ herbal tea. Calls it Moose Juice.”

Shawna blinked at him.

“It’s kind of an Ottawa joke.”

She nodded, taking it in. “Ada is from Ottawa?”

“Oh, sorry . . . thought I mentioned that at Martuni’s.”

“Nope. Nothin’ about anybody being from Ottawa. Nothin’ about *her*, actually. You mentioned two other exes since me.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Takes a while to get it right.”

“Yep. Sure does. I’m glad, though. That’s cool, Otto.”

“Yeah.” He nodded with a look of surprising tenderness. “It is.”

She had to go to Seltzerville; there was no way around it. And there was no way she could ask Otto for sperm with an adoring Canadian clown-lass hanging on his every word—not to mention his leg. So they sipped that nasty tea and spoke with concern about a sixteen-year-old girl who had reportedly gone missing from her parents’ camp, prompting the rangers to seal off the exits to prevent any attempt at abduction. Shawna wondered out loud who would bring their teenage daughter to BRC in the first place, only

to realize how priggish and judgmental she sounded. She hated pretty much everything about herself at that moment.

When she had finished her tea, she bade them farewell and headed off in the direction of Coinkydink. Otto's new ladylove had been a sign, she decided, the final indicator that anonymity was the only way to go—at least, a form of modified anonymity in which she could actually lay eyes on the sperm donor and get a sense of what sort of person he might be. It wasn't so much a question of his physicality (though a degree of attractiveness would be nice) as the need to assess his spirit.

Coinkydink took a while to locate. There was no signage at all, just a ragtag circle of tents that she found troubling. She had not expected (nor had she desired) some grandiose Temple of Immaculate Conception, but this place was laid-back to the point of disinterest. She had to ask around before she could even identify it.

"You've found us," said a petite brunette with a gleam in her eye.

"Oh, thank God."

" 'There's no such thing as Coinkydink.' "

"What?"

"That's our camp slogan."

"Well—I was beginning to think it might be true. I'm looking for someone named Dustpuppy."

The woman frowned. "Sorry, I don't think . . . oh, wait . . . that might be Jonah."

"Might be?"

"I just got here. I don't know everybody's playa name yet."

"Ah."

"Do you know what he looks like?"

"Sorry, I don't." Shawna considered explaining the reason for her visit, then decided against it for fear of compromising the contract. Dustpuppy might not be out to his campmates about the nature of his gifting. After all, it would not be an anonymous act if other people knew about it. Not to mention the fact that the whole damn thing could be a hoax, a wild-goose chase perpetrated by a prankster.

"I'm afraid everyone's gone right now," said the woman. "They took off in our art car."

“And you’re here all by your lonesome?” Shawna had just noticed the perky coral nipples punctuating the woman’s loose fishnet top.

“I don’t mind,” said the woman. “I’m glad for a little peace and quiet.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You’re welcome to wait here for Jonah.”

“Uh . . . well, thanks. I’m not even sure that Jonah is the one I’m looking for. Could you tell me what he looks like?”

The woman shrugged. “Youngish. Blond. Kinda cute.” A kittenish smile flickered across her face before she added: “For a guy.”

Shawna smiled back, letting her know she got the message.

“I know you,” said the woman.

“Oh yeah?”

“Shawna Hanson, right?”

“Hawkins, actually.”

“Right. I saw you on *The View*.”

“Oh . . . yeah. That was fun. Whoopi was fun, anyway.”

The woman stood there for a moment, bouncing on her heels, hands thrust in the pockets of her loose linen trousers.

“So,” she said at last. “I haven’t read your book.”

“I won’t hold that against you,” said Shawna.

They did it in Juliette’s tent—that was her name, Juliette. Their lovemaking was all meandering mouths and fingers, with no purpose at all beyond pleasure. No bicycle couriers were involved, no artisanal twat cozies. It was way uncomplicated and hot. And there was something about Juliette that smelled alluringly of home.

They lay there together, sticky and dusted as fresh pastries.

“Holy shit,” said Juliette.

“I know,” said Shawna.

“Where do you live?”

“I’m staying in the gayborhood.”

“Not Beaverton?”

“No—just with some guys. I mean—gay guys. What’s wrong with Beaverton?”

“Well—those gals are kinda tough.”

“Nothing wrong with tough sometimes.”

“No—I guess not. Anyway, I meant . . . where do you live in the default world?”

“Oh. San Francisco. Valencia Street.”

“Me too. Well . . . Sixteenth, just off Valencia.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Why uh-oh?”

“Well . . . you’re just around the corner. I might come a-callin’.”

“That would be nice,” said Juliette.

“You’re single, then?”

“Yep . . . in the way *you* mean, at least.”

“I don’t get it.”

Juliette reached down and touched her faintly rounded belly. “Next year there will be two of us.”

Shawna was struck dumb for a moment.

“If that’s too much for you,” said Juliette. “Just say so now. I promise I won’t be offended.”

“No,” said Shawna. “It’s not too much for me at all.”

She moved her hand to Juliette’s belly and let it rest there as she gazed through a patch of tent mesh at the bursting blue moon she’d been promised.

Immaculate conception.

Maybe there was more than one way to do it.

A History of Boys

They were seated at the common table at the Martin Hotel when Brian realized that Anna was weeping. Wren had noticed it too and caught Brian's eye with a look of pained concern. Mr. Sudden, however, was completely oblivious as he swabbed up the remains of his lamb gravy with a bread roll. Wren grabbed a paper napkin out of a plastic holder and handed it to Anna without comment.

"I'm so sorry," said Anna, dabbing at her eyes. "This is tiresome of me."

"Don't be silly," said Wren.

"One should not cry over a piece of tin."

Brian looked at the wall behind her. It was an archaeological hodgepodge of knotty pine, gloppy paint, and battered pressed tin from an earlier era. "Does that bring back memories or something?"

"Just all my baby fears and dreams. Do you see it?"

Brian moved to her side of the table and studied the tin, finding nothing of particular interest.

"Look at the pattern," said Anna.

"Okay . . . flowers."

"No. Look again."

Brian finally saw it—or *them*, rather. "Jesus Christ."

Mr. Sudden glanced up from his plate, suddenly taking an interest. "Our Lord is in the tin?"

"No," said Brian. "These days he only shows up at Chick-fil-A."

Wren gave him her don't-provoke-people look.

"It's more like—private parts," he added.

“Pussies and peckers,” said Anna, turning to Mr. Sudden with a nostalgic smile. “That’s what your father called them. He’s the one who showed this to me.”

Now Mr. Sudden was out of his seat, checking out the pattern in the tin. Wren joined him immediately, peering over his shoulder.

“Well, damn if it isn’t,” said Mr. Sudden, widening his eyes at Wren.

They had aroused the curiosity of other customers, who were straining their necks for a closer look. Anna urged her family to take their seats again. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I was being sentimental. I didn’t mean to cause a fuss.”

“Why did he show you this?” asked Mr. Sudden.

“Oh—just something boys do. He used to work in the kitchen here. It was his naughty little secret. We were both sixteen.” She sighed. “So young.”

“And he killed himself.”

“Yes. That summer.”

“And . . . why do you think you had something to do with that?”

“I know I did. I told Lasko’s father he was gay. It must have been the final straw. His father was a terrible, angry man, and . . . the shame was too great, I suppose. He took an overdose of sleeping pills.”

Mr. Sudden hesitated. “So . . . was he gay?”

Anna nodded. “I think so, yes.”

“But he was sleeping with my mother.”

“She was trying to turn him straight. His father had actually paid her to do that. People thought that would work. Back in the days of yore.”

“So his family already . . . suspected he was gay?”

“Yes . . . I think he had a history of boys. But I was the one who confirmed it.”

“And why would you do that?”

“I was jealous. Jealous of them both. So I wrote a letter, pretending it was from my mother, and told his father that Lasko had made a pass at me.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’re losing me again. How would that make him gay?”

“Because . . . I was a boy back then.”

Mr. Sudden blinked at Anna for a moment, then turned to Brian.

“She was,” said Brian.

He wasn't sure if Mr. Sudden believed a word of this, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that Anna had finally unburdened herself.

After dinner, while Wren drove Mr. Sudden home to Sandstone Drive, Brian and Anna waited in rocking chairs on the porch of the restaurant.

"So," he said, as an Amtrak train thundered past them, "it wasn't an anagram at all. You named yourself after Lasko Madrigal."

"Yes."

"He didn't treat you very well."

"No, he didn't, but . . . I saw his goodness for a while, and taking his name was a way of bringing him back to life. I always thought the name was lovely. It has its own music, doesn't it? Especially in Spanish."

"Ma—dri—gal," intoned Brian by way of demonstration, drawing out the a's with basso seductiveness.

She winked at him to prolong the silliness but said nothing further. The two of them sat there in silence, meditating on the red and green lights along the tracks.

"How long did you stay here?" he asked.

"After he killed himself?"

"Yeah."

"Not long. A few weeks. Long enough for the fuss to die down. His family wanted everything hushed up, and . . . I was a big part of the Everything. There would have been trouble if I had stayed."

"Even though nothing happened between you and him?"

She nodded wistfully. "Even though."

"But you were ready to leave, right?"

"Oh yes." She gave him a crooked smile. "I just needed a little boot in the ass."

He chuckled. "So your mother never knew where you went until Mona brought her back to Barbary Lane."

Anna nodded. "I know it sounds cruel, but she would have tried to drag me back, and she would have expected some answers. I couldn't explain myself to someone who didn't know me. I couldn't explain myself to me back then."

"I'm glad you ran away," said Brian. "We wouldn't have had you otherwise. *I* wouldn't have had you. I would have totally . . . missed out on

you.”

Anna gave him a tender smile. “You are the dearest man, Brian Hawkins.”

Embarrassed, he made light of the moment. “Oh, pshaw!”

“*Pshaw?*”

“Isn’t that what you used to say?”

“Maybe *you* did. I’m much too young for *pshaw*.” She reached across the gap between the rockers and took his hand. Her long, slim fingers were cool and silky. “Do you know what I wish, Brian?”

“What?”

“I wish we were all back at Barbary Lane. Just for an hour or two. The whole family. Sitting in the garden and telling our stories.”

Brian chuckled. “That might be a little disconcerting to the stockbrokers who live there now.”

Anna smiled, still holding his hand. “We would invite them down for a toke.” She looked distracted for a moment. “Oh—I’ve been meaning to ask you.” She pulled an envelope from her blue velvet drawstring bag and handed it to him.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Just a note from Amos. And three tickets to something.”

“Who’s Amos?”

“Jake’s new beau. The one who gave us our bon voyage.”

Brian examined the contents of the envelope. The note read:

Anna,

We would love to have you with us, if you’re feeling up to it.

There’s room for an RV in our camp. Brian will be able to explain.

Amos

The tickets were to Burning Man.

Anna’s eyes were on him now. “So explain,” she said.

“It defies description,” he told her.

Nevertheless, he tried.

Back at the RV, he and Wren tucked Anna into bed. “I suppose,” she said, gazing up at them, “it’s not a very practical idea. Going to this Burning

thing.”

“Not really,” he said. “We’d have to go hundreds of miles south and then head north again. We’re in the same state, but that’s about it.”

“Ah—I see. Oh well.”

“I’m sure you’ll get a full report from Jake—and Shawna for that matter.”

“She’s going, too?”

“Yep,” said Wren. “With Michael and Ben.”

“Goodness. Everyone.”

Brian was starting to feel like a shit, but someone had to be the grown-up here. “They’ll be back in a week,” he told her. “We’ll have a dinner somewhere and get a full recap.”

“A week might be too long,” Anna replied vaguely.

He was about to tell her that a week would fly by in no time when Wren rose abruptly and left the room. Great, he thought. My wife is pissed at me now.

He turned back to Anna. “It’s just that it’s a harsh environment. We don’t have enough food or water or anything. It takes serious preparation.”

“I understand, dear. I’ve just had this feeling, that’s all.”

“What sort of feeling?”

“You know . . . spooky old me.”

He brushed a wayward strand of hair from her forehead. “Listen, lady. No premonitions until we get you home.”

“But they’re not about me,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Pumpkin—” Wren was calling from the front of the RV. “May I have a word with you, please?”

“Go,” said Anna, releasing him from further discussion.

Wren was at the dining table, hunched over her laptop. “Take a look at this,” she said. It was a MapQuest map of the region with a road already highlighted. “We don’t have to head that far south. There’s a direct route between here and Burning Man. You just head out past the Blue Moon and keep driving. It’s a straight shot.”

Brian studied the map for a moment.

“See?” said Wren triumphantly. “Looks like it’s only a hundred miles or so.”

“Yeah, a hundred miles of totally bad-ass road. It’s all dirt, baby. Probably rutted too. That’s Jungo Road. Where those evil gold mines are.”

“So? What’s a few cyanide pits between us and them?”

He shrugged. “Okay—fine. Just make sure our cell phones are charged.”

She turned and gaped at him. “Wow, that was easy.”

“I can’t fight the two of you,” he said.

“She’s up for it, then?”

“She’s having one of her feelings again.”

“Feelings?”

“An intuition, apparently.”

“About what?”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

In the morning they didn’t head directly to Jungo Road. At Anna’s request they went to the twin-towered Catholic church in the heart of town. Anna had been christened at St. Paul’s, she explained, wearing a long white gown that Margaret had made for the occasion. She remembered the church and wanted to see it again.

The building, however, was locked.

Anna’s face briefly registered disappointment. Then, spotting an iron gate by the side of the church, she wobbled past a shabby grotto into a cemetery full of plastic flowers and tombstones old and new. It wasn’t a dauntingly large space, but the sun was brutal, so Brian became concerned when Anna kept moving.

“You wait here in the shade,” he told her. “What are we looking for?”

“Madrigals,” she said.

Wren jumped at the challenge, scouring the inscriptions on the stones with such enthusiasm that she hit pay dirt in less than three minutes. “Here’s someone named Hegazti Madrigal,” she hollered to Anna. “He died in nineteen ninety-three.”

“She,” said Anna.

“What?”

“Hegazti was a she.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Are there any others nearby?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Wait.” Brian had spotted a stone that was flush with the ground. It was no bigger than a shoe box and weatherworn, but its inscription was easily readable.

BELASKO MADRIGAL
1920–1936

Wren gasped at the discovery. Brian wasn’t sure whether his tone should be celebratory or funereal, so he returned to the shade, where Anna was waiting, and escorted her back to the grave marker. She stood there for about a minute, smiling tenderly at the granite reality, before murmuring a word that made no sense to him.

“Abyssinia,” she said.

Worlds Beyond

Ben and Michael were swapping sleepy grins, since the kid in the Pan outfit had conked out on Michael's chest in the big tent at Comfort and Joy. There was no way to move without waking him, so Michael was accommodating his weight to the point of numbness. "He's so peaceful," he murmured. "I hate to disturb him."

"There's no rush," said Ben, realizing how blissful that simple fact made him. He could spend an eternity here in this cushioned puppy pile of lantern-lit men, watching his husband holding this goat-legged kid. The kid's hand was resting on Michael's Buddha belly, receiving its benediction even in sleep. The oceanic sounds of sex still ebbed and flowed in various corners of the tent, but the three of them were contentedly beached, for the moment at least, on a warm and golden shore.

The kid stirred and rubbed his eye with his fist.

"Hey," he said, as if he had just discovered them.

"Hey," said Michael, kissing his forehead beneath the horns.

The kid rolled over languidly and nestled between the two of them. His once-prancing penis was now a silky pink mouse napping in his faux fur loins. He seemed to be startled, briefly, by the jungle growl of an orgasm in a far corner of the tent, but his lips soon plumped into a smile of understanding.

"I have a feeling," he said, "I'm not in Snowflake anymore."

Michael chuckled. "I have a feeling you've said that before."

"Maybe."

"I used to say it about Orlando."

"Where's Snowflake?" asked Ben.

"It rings a bell," said Michael, "for some reason."

“Arizona,” said the kid.

“Right.”

“How does that ring a bell?” asked Ben.

“Probably our alien abductions,” said the kid.

“I don’t think that’s it,” said Michael.

Ben laughed.

“They were for real,” said the kid. “They made a movie out of it.”

They were quiet for a while. The kid was holding Ben’s cock—not in a particularly insistent way but idly, halfheartedly, as if it were a toy he might get around to playing with again. Michael noticed this and smiled benignly at Ben.

“Are you guys a couple?” asked the kid.

“You bet,” said Michael. “Husbands.”

Ben looked over at the man he’d been with for eight years, the man he’d married twice just to make it stick. Michael’s generation—its history of fighting disease and bigotry—sometimes made him grumpier than Ben would like him to be, but he knew what he’d found in Michael: a gift for intimacy like none Ben had ever known. Michael, for all his messiness, knew how to connect with him completely.

“Don’t you ever get jealous?” asked the kid.

“Oh, yeah,” said Michael. “Truly, madly, deeply jealous.”

“So?”

“So it’s not as big an emotion as the one that holds us together.”

The kid rolled his head toward Ben. “Do *you* get jealous?”

Ben hesitated just long enough for Michael to laugh. “Hell, no,” said Michael. “He knows he’s got me for life. I *try* to make him jealous, but I have no luck at all.”

The kid grabbed Michael’s cock with his other hand. “Bet I could do it.”

Ben laughed. “How can I be jealous of someone who doesn’t have a name?”

“Dustpuppy,” said the kid.

“Cute,” said Michael. “Kinda perfect, in fact.”

Ben agreed that it was. Everything about this man was suited to their molly moment. He seemed closer to a spirit than a human being, the uncomplicated embodiment of youthful lust and sweetness. Ben remembered the kid’s reference to alien abductions in Arizona and amused

himself with the thought that Dustpuppy had been sent to them on assignment from another planet, an escort for worlds beyond.

“I have to sit up,” said Michael. “You guys stay put.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Dustpuppy.

“Your foot?” asked Ben. He was well acquainted with this scenario. Michael’s lingering gout had a way of making his limbs go numb. “Here,” he said, grabbing a nearby bolster and propping it against a tent pole. Michael settled against it and issued a groan of relief as he extended his foot and shook it like a dust mop.

“Better,” said Michael. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

Dustpuppy looked distressed, so Ben tried to put him at ease. “It’s his circulation,” he said, gathering pillows in his arms. “Here . . . we can all sit up.” He made a big pile against which the three of them reclined like drowsy pashas.

Ben found himself slipping in and out of sleep. The last time he awoke, Dustpuppy had gone (headed off, no doubt, for a mission on another planet), so Ben snuggled closer to Michael, who murmured his contentment unintelligibly.

Someone across the tent was playing a small stringed instrument. It had a medieval Anglo-Saxon sound.

“The music of our people,” Ben said with a smile.

Another murmur from Michael.

“What is that?” asked Ben. “A lyre or a lute. I’ve never known the difference.”

“What difference?”

“You know—between a lyre and a lute.”

There was no response from Michael, so Ben looked directly into his eyes. They were open but unblinking. “Are you okay, honey?”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Look at me, Michael . . . Michael?”

“I’m fine.” Michael’s eyes rolled back, exposing the whites.

“Sweetheart . . . damn it!”

Michael’s whole body was shaking now, a series of small convulsions that made him lurch forward off the pile of pillows.

Ben looked up and yelled to no one in particular, “Help us, please! Is there a doctor here? Somebody, please help us!”

The music ended abruptly. Several people sprang to their feet and rushed to offer aid, standing in a circle around them. Some of them were naked and still had semi-erections—a detail that Ben would remember and recount for years to come.

Michael was blue and unmoving. His breathing had stopped completely. His legs were wet with urine.

Ben held him in his arms and began to cry out of sheer helplessness.

He could not leave this man, so he could not run for help.

“Stretch out!” said someone behind him. “Get him flat!”

So Ben complied, lowering Michael to the dusty carpet, arranging his limbs with such care that he might have been preparing him for ritual anointment.

Do it right, he told himself. Assume he’s alive.

“I’m here, babe,” he said. “Don’t worry. We’re taking this ride together.”

No response. Michael’s hand was cold and stiff as Ben held it in a frantic pantomime of ordinary life.

“Get Hawkeye!” someone shouted.

“I’m on it!” said another. “Where is he?”

“Next door at Celestial Bodies. He’s a ranger. He’s got a walkie-talkie!”

Ben just kept talking quietly to his husband’s inert face. “They’re getting Hawkeye, sweetheart. He’s a ranger.”

Nothing.

“He’s got a walkie-talkie.”

Nothing.

“I love you, Michael. Do you hear me? I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. I promised you that, didn’t I? I’m here, baby, right here, so listen to me, okay?”

But Michael was beyond listening.

In Her Mind's Eye

The road was so rutted that Anna was jostled awake several times in the course of the hundred-mile drive. There was very little to be seen outside the window beyond the powdery emptiness in the headlights of Brian's motor home. She had asked to be wakened when they passed through Jungo, but that moment never came, since Brian said there had been no evidence of the town's existence. Not a train track, nor a station, nor a skeleton of planks that might have passed for Mrs. Austin's general store. *Time* magazine (and the gold lust of President Hoover) had made Jungo a new El Dorado, but the town had long since vanished, its bones picked clean by the other time, the lowercased time, whose truth was more reliable in the end.

Wren was sitting on the floor the last time Anna awoke.

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you okay? It's awfully bumpy."

She agreed that the road was a bit of a washboard. "The bed is comfy, though. It almost absorbs the shock."

"Frankly," said Wren, "I'm a little nauseous. Just hoping you aren't."

Anna explained that her stomach was ironclad and always had been.

"Lucky you," said Wren.

"I hope I'm not being a nuisance."

"No—no . . . I'm curious about Burning Man myself. And Brian promises a nice flat road on the way back."

It would serve no purpose, Anna realized, to explain her real motivation for requesting this side trip. Her gift for premonition—whether morbid or pleasant—had often fallen short of the mark, so she knew it was best to keep her mouth shut. Even if—heaven forbid—there proved to be a reason

for her growing dread, there was nothing they could do about it now. She would only cause them early anguish.

Still, it was hard to forget the times she'd been right.

Lasko, for instance, had been leaving the world just when she had decided to ask for his forgiveness. And forty years later, on a Christmas Eve at Barbary Lane, she would know the very moment that life left Edgar Halcyon, her one great love. She would not be with him at the time, but she would feel it—a warm breeze of bay rum and Harris tweed that swept through every pore of her body.

This time, though, she was seeing a tent. A big tent scattered with bright pillows, like something out of the Arabian Nights. And people she didn't recognize were scrambling around frantically and shouting the word *doctor*.

"Where are you right now?" asked Wren.

"Nowhere I should be, apparently."

"I hear you. The mind wanders when you're on the moon. This has to be the most desolate place I've ever seen. There hasn't been another vehicle since we left Winnemucca. I just tried calling a friend and—nada. We're fine, though. We have more than enough Kombucha to survive the trip."

Anna smiled at her. This woman was such a generous, uncomplicated spirit. How perfectly suited she was for leading Brian out of his vagrant gloom.

"Anyway," Wren added, "Brian says we'll be in Gerlach in a half an hour. That's the town at the entrance."

This moment of consolation was punctuated by another walloping bounce from the motor home—and the sound of Brian hollering "Whoa, Nellie!"

Wren rolled her eyes. "I have no idea where that came from."

"I think," said Anna, "from Michael."

"Really?"

"An old cowboy show on television. Someone said it to a Jeep."

Wren grinned. "I'm sure the Nellie part was what amused Michael."

There had been plenty of talk about butch and nellie in those days. Anna in fact had worried that Michael would embrace one or the other to such a degree that the natural blend could not occur. She need not have fretted. In no time at all an entire orchestra of gender traits were at Michael's

command, and he took joy in the mix. He had once been fond of referring to himself as the Butchinelli Brothers.

Anna managed a smile. “He brought you into the family, really.”

Wren shrugged. “Does meeting me in a bar count?”

“It better . . . or nothing will.”

Wren laughed. “You’re right, though. I would never have met Brian without Michael. He was one of those people you take to instantly. So full of life and mischief you could just eat him with a spoon.”

Anna looked away, afraid that her face would betray her feelings.

“I hope we can find him,” said Wren, “in the midst of that madhouse.”

“Do we know it’s going to be a madhouse?” asked Anna.

“Well—Brian says it’s going to be festive and very busy. But Michael’s staying with Shawna, and we know where *she’s* staying. Once we park with Jake and Amos, we can put out the word. Word has a way of spreading there, apparently.”

I can feel it, thought Anna. I can feel the word spreading out from that tent like bright red syrup in a cone of shaved ice.

How awful it was to eavesdrop without being there, without being able to act. She asked Wren to help her sit up in the bed.

“We can move you to a chair if you like.”

“No, this is fine. I just need to look out at something.”

Wren plumped a pillow behind her and gazed out at the gray blur beyond the window. “Even if it’s nothing, huh?”

Anna nodded. *Even if it’s nothing.*

Wren, sensing something wrong, stayed with Anna for a period of silence, broken only by another “Whoa, Nellie!” from Brian as the vehicle hit another rut.

“For God’s sake,” Wren hollered, “don’t break an axle.”

“I’m workin’ on it,” her husband hollered back.

The tent seemed more subdued now. Fewer players in the scene. The cause for the commotion had apparently been removed.

This might have been calming to Anna, but somehow it wasn’t.

Something Else Afoot

Mary Ann's shift at Arctica had left her bone-tired and aching. Who knew ice could be so fricking heavy? She had tried to push through to the end, but one of her coworkers had noticed her exhaustion and insisted that she go home and rest. If he had known that "home" was this air-conditioned Hollywood-style trailer with a comfy king bed and a wafer-thin television, he might not have been so sympathetic, but she accepted his compassion without protest. There was no way she could face the medical tent tonight without a little down time. And possibly a filet mignon.

It was good to be tired this way. She remembered the old tired, the tired that had dogged her before her cancer was diagnosed, and the tired that had drained her after her surgery. But she had been cancer-free for four years now, so she had reason to savor her ordinary old-person weariness. There were worse things in life than the usual aches, and she had known them, thank you very much.

She stretched out on the bed with her flute of prosecco and congratulated herself on having accepted DeDe Halcyon-Wilson's invitation to occupy this pleasure craft. DeDe's and D'or's RV was next door, so there was plenty of opportunity for fellowship whenever she wanted it. She just didn't want it right now. She wanted to sip her prosecco, and meditate for a while, and maybe have a modest shower and a nap. As she lay sorting out the order in which these events would occur, she noticed the ever-deepening drifts of playa dust on the floor. You could not get away from the stuff, however elegant your quarters. It walked right in the door and sat down.

She knew how plenty of Burners felt about plug and play. She had seen the barely concealed contempt on the face of Jake's new boyfriend, Amos. To this young hipster, she was just one of those decadent trustafarians who

let other people shop for their costumes, or *make* them even, who let other people cook for them and build their art cars. All of which might be true to an extent, but it was still hurtful. In the end, everybody faced the whiteouts. It was a very democratizing thing, the dust.

Besides, it was not like they were sponsored by Halliburton or something. This camp had been organized by dinky little *Western Gentry* magazine, or more accurately, westerngentrymag.com, the online presence of the society publication. It was hardly the evil empire. The magazine had not been especially intrusive either, beyond photographing the inaugural organic barbecue, when Mary Ann's Steampunk Duchess costume had been looking (if she did say so herself) pretty darn rad.

No, she had not made it herself. So the fuck what.

The next time she spoke to Amos, she would try to give him a better idea of who she really was. She wanted him to know that. She wanted him to like her.

She had a feeling he'd be around for a while.

She was in the midst of meditation when someone rapped energetically on the side of the RV. She considered ignoring it, then finally rose and opened the door.

It was Shawna with another young woman.

"Hola, Mary Ann."

"Omigod. What are you doing here?"

Shawna rolled her eyes just the way she had when she was six—toward someone else. "She's been saying that to me my whole life."

Mary Ann smiled and extended her soiled candy-striped arms. "You know what I mean. Come in. Give me a fucking hug."

They embraced with an audible double sigh, much to Mary Ann's relief.

"Mary Ann—Juliette. Juliette—Mary Ann."

"I'm the friend formerly known as mother," said Mary Ann, shaking Juliette's hand. "I adopted her at birth, but I left her with her dad when she was little."

"Wait till she gets through the door, Mary Ann."

"Oh—sorry."

"She overshares," Shawna told Juliette.

“Like you don’t,” said Mary Ann, grinning. “Seriously—how did you know I was here?”

“Jake and Amos.”

“Of course. I gave them ice at Arctica.” She closed the door and led them into the lounge, which, with its rounded corners and buried purple lights, reminded her vaguely of Virgin First Class. “Okay, no cracks about bourgeois decadence.”

“Not a peep out of me,” said Shawna.

“By the way,” said Mary Ann, gesturing for them to sit down. “I don’t think Amos likes me very much.”

Shawna shrugged. “Nobody does at first.”

Juliette gaped at Shawna. “Dude.”

“It’s all right,” said Mary Ann. “We understand each other.”

“I like you already,” said Juliette.

Shawna, Mary Ann noted, seemed unduly pleased to hear that.

They gabbed and laughed and drank prosecco, and Mary Ann broke out the prosciutto-wrapped melon the nice *Western Gentry* staff member had left in her fridge that morning. Shawna’s pretty friend seemed to be a fairly recent one, maybe even a hookup, but Juliette was bright as a button and obviously smitten with Shawna. Who could blame her? Shawna had always been a charmer, and now, of course, she was sort of a celebrity. Certainly much more of a celebrity than Mary Ann had ever been during her run on *Mary Ann in the Morning*. Shawna had already been on *Letterman* several times; Mary Ann’s fame had never crossed the Central Valley.

Mary Ann knew she had no right to be proud of Shawna, but she was. She was proud of the spunky seven-year-old she could still see in this woman. She was proud of the woman who had survived abandonment so many years ago. Better yet, she *liked* this woman who had faced her trials and written about them so bravely, who picked her lovers as adventurously as she picked her clothes.

She knew that Shawna liked her as well. That had happened precisely because they had both scrapped any effort at reconciliation. There had been nothing to reconcile after all these years, only a new foundation to be built. It helped that they loved people in common: Michael, Ben, Jake, Brian (yes, Brian), and, of course, Anna.

Still, she was puzzled as to why Shawna had pulled this surprise visit today, especially in the company of someone Mary Ann had never met. It could have been merely a matter of air-conditioning and comfortable seating—Mary Ann would not have blamed her for that—but there was something else afoot that eluded her.

Shawna and Juliette left after a two-hour visit. Shawna lagged behind for a few extra words.

“Thanks for this.”

“Hey,” said Mary Ann. “It was fun. She’s a nice girl.”

“It may not be anything,” said Shawna. “But I wanted you to meet them.”

“Them?”

Shawna blushed—a rare occurrence. “Her, I mean, of course.” She looked away, flustered. “Come join us down at Dusty Dames tonight, if you feel like it.”

This was Mary Ann’s first invitation to the funkier world beyond *Western Gentry*. She was profoundly touched that it had come from Shawna.

“Oh, thanks,” she said. “That would be wonderful, but I’ve got night duty over at the medical tent.”

The Marvelous Present

For Brian, Black Rock City was the same, only different. The same bursts of color and whimsy, but noticeably bigger and slicker, like the leap between the old Vegas and the new Vegas. Wren and Anna, on the other hand, found everything fresh and captivating. They kept their faces pressed to the windows like toddlers at a Macy's Christmas display. Brian was relieved to see Anna looking more cheerful; something had been clouding her spirit on the hard road from Winnemucca.

He might have been more cheerful himself if he hadn't been absorbed by his search for Trans Bay, the camp where Jake and Amos were staying, where there was supposedly a parking spot waiting for them. If he could find the fucking camp. As usual, the signs were hard to read out here, and some of the camps blurred into each other like stalls at a crowded flea market. You would think, he told himself, that a camp run by transgender activists from San Francisco would announce itself with a little more aplomb, but maybe he was just stereotyping under duress.

"I'm sorry," he told the ladies in back. "It's around here somewhere. I know you're ready for a decent night's sleep."

"We're fine," said Wren. "This is just mind-boggling."

"Oh my goodness, look at that!" Anna was pointing to an art car crossing an intersection ahead of them. It was an enormous pedal-driven tricycle, a butterfly with orange-and-black wings that flapped as it moved. The wings were lighted in such a way that they glowed like amber glass. Brian laughed with joy.

"It's a monarch," said Anna. "Do you know about monarchs?"

"Just what they look like," said Brian.

"I'm clueless," said Wren.

“They migrate like birds,” Anna explained. “They’re the only butterflies that do. But the distance of their migration is so enormous—thousands of miles—that they can’t make the journey on their own. They only live for two months.”

“So—how do they do it?”

“They don’t. Their children do it. Their grandchildren. Somehow they know exactly where to go and specifically where to land. Somehow—it’s in them. The new generation winters in the same tree every year without ever having seen the tree.” Anna paused as the butterfly tricycle rounded the corner and disappeared into the swirl of traffic. “They don’t need their elders at all. It’s a miraculous thing.”

Brian knew she was talking to him, but he didn’t say a word. He didn’t trust his voice not to crack.

“They’re poisonous,” Anna added, “so they’re tough little bastards. Nobody would dare eat them. They’re flying caution signs—look at them, orange and black, pure Halloween. But they survive, and their pattern is so familiar it’s imprinted on our brains like something generic—like plaid. Am I making any sense?”

Wren murmured her understanding.

“They have two months,” said Anna. “That’s it. But some part of them must know that they’re part of this endless continuum, this . . . community after death. And even if they *don’t* know, we know, and that itself takes your breath away.”

“It does,” said Wren, a little too fervently. “I believe in that.”

“It’s not a metaphor for heaven,” said Anna.

“Well, why not?”

“Because I’m too old for that shit.”

“Oh, now—”

“Tell her, Brian.”

“She’s too old for that shit.”

Wren laughed. “You two!”

“I’m not too old for *this*,” Anna gestured to the carnival sparkling outside the window. “Thank you, Brian, for the marvelous present.”

He wasn’t sure if she meant present as in gift—this side trip into Black Rock City—or present as in now, this moment, the marvelous present.

Either way, he was glad to be thanked.

He found Trans Bay a few minutes later. Someone named Lisa directed him curtly to a space at the back of the camp, where she barked orders as he angled the Winnie into its assigned spot. She was friendlier, though, when he was finally in place. She clamped her hands on the door and congratulated him on his expertise.

“I’ve been moving this barge around for a while,” he told her.

“Amos said you might be coming,” said Lisa. “We were beginning to think he was bullshitting us.”

Brian smiled at her. “We had a few other errands to run.”

Lisa seemed to hesitate. “Look—do you mind if I ask—” She cut herself off.

“Go ahead,” he said. “You’re entitled, whatever it is. We’re grateful for the hospitality.”

Lisa placed her wide, sturdy hand on her heart, as if to keep it from escaping, then lowered her voice. “Is Anna Madrigal in there?”

Brian smiled at her. “The one and only.”

“Oh my Jesus fucking God.” The words were uttered reverently, like a prayer of adoration. “She saved my life in Eye Rack.”

Brian’s first thought was about Lisa’s grotesque pronunciation, one of his major irritants these days. *We invade a country, bomb the shit out of it, kill hundreds of thousands of people, and we still don’t have the decency to say its name right.*

“You must be thinking of someone else,” he said. “Anna’s never been to —”

“No, man, she was right there on my iPad in Eye Rack.”

My iPad in Eye Rack.

“There was an article about her on this transgender blog, and—she made me see how I could be old and happy. She made me want to live and come home to Sunnyvale and . . . be myself. Oh shit!”

The “Oh shit!” had come in response to the tears plopping down Lisa’s coarse, pockmarked cheeks. Brian yanked a couple of Kleenexes from the box Wren had installed on the dashboard and handed them to Lisa. “Here ya go, soldier.”

“Sergeant,” said Lisa, mopping up before blowing her nose noisily. “Don’t let her see me like this. I need to pretty up first.”

“Roger Wilco,” said Brian. (He wasn’t sure if that was the proper army lingo, but Lisa didn’t correct him.) “In the meantime, can you help us find Jake and Amos?”

“Oh, sure. They’re right over—oh shit, they left on the art car.”

“Do you know when they’ll be back?”

“Well . . . you know how *that* is. Or do you?”

“Yep. I do. I’m an old Burner.”

Lisa left, and Brian joined the ladies in back. It felt good to kick back, to enjoy the sensation of having landed somewhere after sixty miles of rutted moonscape. The terrain here was virtually the same as Jungo Road, but there was life at least, and its throbbing expectant rhythms could be heard just outside. He sank into the armchair and pried the cap off an Anchor Steam. “Jake is away for a while,” he said.

“Ah,” said Anna, looking disappointed.

Wren tried to be helpful. “Does he have his cell on him?”

“Nobody has a cell,” Brian told her. “There’s very little reception, and the dust would destroy them.”

Wren smirked as she gazed out the window at a knot of revelers heading into the night. “And even if you had one, there’d be damn few places to stick it.”

Brian smiled at her, feeling an enormous surge of love. Home, for better or worse, would always be next to this woman. “Want a beer, honey?”

Wren puckered her lips at him—her technique for silently conveying love. “I’m fine, pumpkin.” She glanced over at Anna with tender, nanny-eyed sympathy. “This one, though, could probably use a good night’s sleep.”

Anna shook her head decisively. “No . . . not yet.”

“Don’t make me get bossy,” said Brian. “Jake and Amos will get back eventually, but there’s nothing we can do until then but get lost out there.” He had already tried, and failed, to remember the name of Shawna’s camp, if he had ever known it in the first place. It was just common sense to stay put. If your car broke down in Death Valley, you stayed with the car and waited for someone to find you. Without exception. Especially if your car had a frail old lady inside.

“You don’t understand,” said Anna. “He’s alone.”

“Who?” asked Brian.

“Michael.”

“*Our* Michael?”

“Yes.” There was both urgency and impatience in her tone, as if Brian were deliberately misunderstanding her.

“Are you being spooky?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing. Listen to me, dear. He’s leaving, and he needs someone with him.”

Those Four Minutes

This particular someone had pigtails of plaited silver that evoked both Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm and Baby Jane Hudson. They erupted from the side of her head with childlike gaiety, though her face was etched with her years when she smiled down at him. The smile placed her. It moved him past the nonsensical name tag and the pink-and-white-striped uniform into the realm of someone he loved.

“Mary Ann?”

“Call me Candystriper,” she said.

“Where’s Ben?”

“With the doctor. He’s here. Don’t worry.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I work here.”

“Am I dead?”

“Oh, gee, thanks.”

“I just mean . . . this is surreal. You aren’t medically trained.”

“Go ahead. Rub it in.” She paused. “All I have to do is draw a little blood.”

“No fucking way.”

She smiled. “I’m just here to cheer you up.” Her cool, elegant hand swept across his forehead. “How am I doing, babycakes?”

“Not bad, so far.”

“You scared the shit out of Ben, you know. You were out for four minutes. White as a sheet and limp. He thought you were dead.”

This still made no sense to him. He remembered talking to Ben about lyres and lutes, he remembered Ben asking if something was the matter, he remembered Ben telling him the paramedics were on the way, he

remembered telling Ben that it was an overreaction, that he had merely passed out pleasantly for a moment or two. He had not been there at all for the peeing and shaking and the going limp. He had not even believed it until one of the paramedics asked him to stand up and he felt the soggy cotton sticking to his leg. Then he had grown sheepish in the presence of these proficient strangers. “Your point is well taken,” he had told them with a smile.

He remembered, too, the flickering film of his trip to the medical tent: the bouncy humiliation of the stretcher ride, the way the lights of the ambulance stole the thunder of the EL-wired bicycles that parted to let them pass. He remembered how the paramedic in the ambulance had slapped his wrists and complained jovially about his absence of veins, finally settling on a fierce jab to the back of his hand. He remembered watching the IV bag as the fluid—whatever it was—dripped into him. He remembered thinking: This could be serious. This could take me out right now.

“What do they think it was?” he asked Mary Ann.

“Apparently you had a little seizure.”

“Brought on by what?”

“It happens sometimes when people pass out sitting up. Your organs get all squished up or something, so the body shuts down.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Sofa Daddy had been the perfect playa name for him.

“I’m not supposed to talk about these things,” Mary Ann whispered, “so act surprised when they tell you.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “I’ll do my best.”

That was so like her, he realized. It stirred pleasant echoes of the old days at 28 Barbary Lane. *Mrs. Madrigal is throwing a party for your birthday, so don’t go out cruising tonight, and be sure to act surprised when it happens.*

She had to be the first to tell you. It was her favorite form of intimacy.

When Ben returned, Mary Ann was gone. Ben kissed him on the cheek, then pulled a chair next to the bed.

“Did that freak you out?” he asked. “Seeing Mary Ann?”

“It did feel mildly hallucinatory. All of this does.”

Ben nodded. “Do you wanna leave?”

“I might . . .” He didn’t want to disappoint Ben, but he was craving clean sheets and hot showers. “Did the doctor say I should leave?”

“No. She just said to take it easy. No more drugs for a while, and keep hydrating. She suggested an MRI when we get home.”

“For what?”

“Just to make sure it was nothing . . . out of the ordinary.”

Michael felt drained and disoriented. At the moment, it was not hard to believe that something might be out of the ordinary. “I’m a little scared, sweetheart.”

Ben smiled. “*You* are?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“For what?”

“I dunno. For scaring you. For thinking you overreacted.”

“Well . . . *that* you can be sorry for.”

“It must have been awful, those four minutes.”

Ben hesitated. “I said good-bye to you. I told you I loved you, and I said good-bye. Just in case you could hear me.”

Awful, indeed, but immeasurably beautiful to the living Michael.

“Take me home,” he said.

No Tidying Up

Word of Anna's arrival in Black Rock City had spread as if by smoke signals even before Jake and Amos returned to Trans Bay. As near as Brian could figure, Sergeant Lisa had a lot to do with it, since perfect strangers had been inscribing love letters to their icon in the thick dust of the Winnebago. Jake himself was misty-eyed at the sight of his roommate. "Shit," he said. "I'd totally given up hope."

"Oh, you must never do that," she said.

"How did you even find us?"

"Your friend," said Anna, casting her eyes toward Amos.

"Tickets and everything," said Wren.

Jake gaped at Amos. "You are so bad. And so rich, apparently."

Everyone but Amos laughed awkwardly, since no one seemed to know the full truth of this. Amos just ducked his head with a modest smile.

"Wait'll you see what we made for you," said Jake.

Anna widened her eyes. "For me?"

"I think," said Brian, jumping in, "it's time we let our ladyship go to bed. Everything will be a helluva lot more fun in the morning."

Anna ignored him. "You don't know where we can find Michael, do you?"

"Sure," said Jake. "They're over on Edelweiss. Want me to bike over there and tell him you're here?"

"Would you, dear?"

"Should I tell him to join us in the morning? We do a bitchin' breakfast here."

"A bitchin' breakfast sounds heavenly."

And with that Jake and Amos left, and Wren and Brian began helping Anna prepare for bed. She looked profoundly weary to Brian, but he also detected a certain restlessness as he pulled off her slippers and adjusted her sheets. The chill of a desert night had crept into the Winnie, so he pulled a blanket from the overhead compartment and placed it at the foot of the bed. “Just in case,” he told Anna.

“You’ll wake me, won’t you, dear, when Jake gets back?”

“Of course,” he said.

But fifteen minutes later, when Jake got back, the news was hardly worthy of a wake-up.

“I couldn’t find them,” he said at the door. “Nobody’s seen them for a while.”

Brian stepped out of the Winnie and shut the door.

“They’re gone?”

“It’s possible, I guess. The car isn’t there.”

“Shit.” Brian thought for a moment. “What about Shawna? She’s supposed to be staying at their camp.”

“I checked. She’s off with some chick named Juliette.”

“Of course she is.”

He knew he sounded like a cranky old dad, but he couldn’t help it. Anna wanted the family together, and he would do his damndest to make it happen.

His damndest was not enough. The next morning at Trans Bay’s traditional flapjack breakfast—a long trestle table under a lavender awning—he broke the news as gently as possible. “It’s looking like they may have left,” he told her. “But we could still run into them. Same goes for Shawna. This place is like that.”

“I understand,” she said, a strangely placid light in her eyes.

“And we can stay here as long as we like.”

“That’s very nice of them.”

“It takes a while sometimes for people to come together here, but that’s the beauty of—”

“Brian, dear—you mustn’t try to tidy things up. You’ll just exhaust yourself.”

“What?”

“There’s no tidying up to be done . . . with the possible exception of this hat.” She fiddled with the loose ends of the turban that Sergeant Lisa had presented to her as soon as they had left the Winnie that morning. “What I mean to say is . . . I’ve said all I need to say to each and every one of you. Michael included. It’s in you now for good.” She reached over and took his hand. “Do you understand me, dear?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“There’s nothing you have to say, nothing you have to do . . . and nowhere I have to be. It’s all free time from here on out. For both of us.”

Wren, sitting across the table, noticed this exchange and smiled at him. Then her beautiful lips went oval in amazement. “You are shitting me,” she said.

He turned to see what she meant.

It was that monarch butterfly, looming above them like the inevitable.

The Ride

She was amazed at the practiced grace with which they placed her in the highest seat. Jake and Amos led her up the ramp, holding her arms, while Sergeant Lisa, quite literally, brought up the rear. She landed in the pod (as Jake called it) much the way she landed in her favorite chair at home. They gave her a thermos of cold water and a pretty Edwardian parasol and a silver bell to ring whenever she wanted their attention. The ride would last fifteen minutes, they told her, unless she wanted it to end earlier. The three pods beneath her held Jake, Amos, and Sergeant Lisa.

Then the machine began to move, and she heard a squeal of delight from Wren and a manly hoot from Brian and waves of applause—applause!—from the people assembled along the road. She assumed they were clapping for this wondrous human-propelled creation with its flapping jack-o'-lantern wings until she heard the chants as she moved toward the blazing white ocean of the open desert.

Anna Madrigal, Anna Madrigal, Anna Madrigal . . .

How on earth did they know?

She looked down and saw Jake beaming up at her, pointing to a sign on the front of the butterfly. She could not read it from this height and angle, but she assumed it bore her name. A name she had chosen herself, by way of reparation, all those years ago.

The glorious machine picked up speed. The wheels were singing to her now, the warm wind caressing her face like the softest yellow chiffon. She could feel the freedom in her hair as she raised her arms, ever so briefly, to the welcoming sky. The cheers grew dimmer, fading away at the moment of release. A single voice remained, redolent of love.

“Be good, lamb! Live long and be good!”

Margaret was running after her down the train tracks, blowing kisses and weeping copiously. She could barely manage it in those heels, but she was trying.

“Remember to call my aunt on the Embarcadero!”

“I will.”

“And use the money for something nice!”

“I will.”

“And don’t forget to—”

Anna couldn’t hear the rest, but she knew she would have to learn her own lessons now.

There was a city waiting for her.

About the Author

ARMISTEAD MAUPIN is the author of the nine-volume Tales of the City series; his other books include *Maybe the Moon* and *The Night Listener*. Maupin was the 2012 recipient of the Lambda Literary Foundation's Pioneer Award. In 2014 he received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He lives in San Francisco with his husband, the photographer Christopher Turner.

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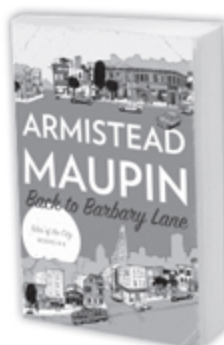
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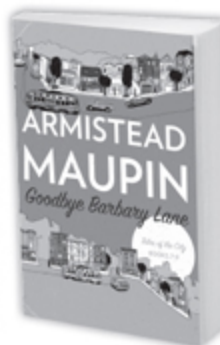
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